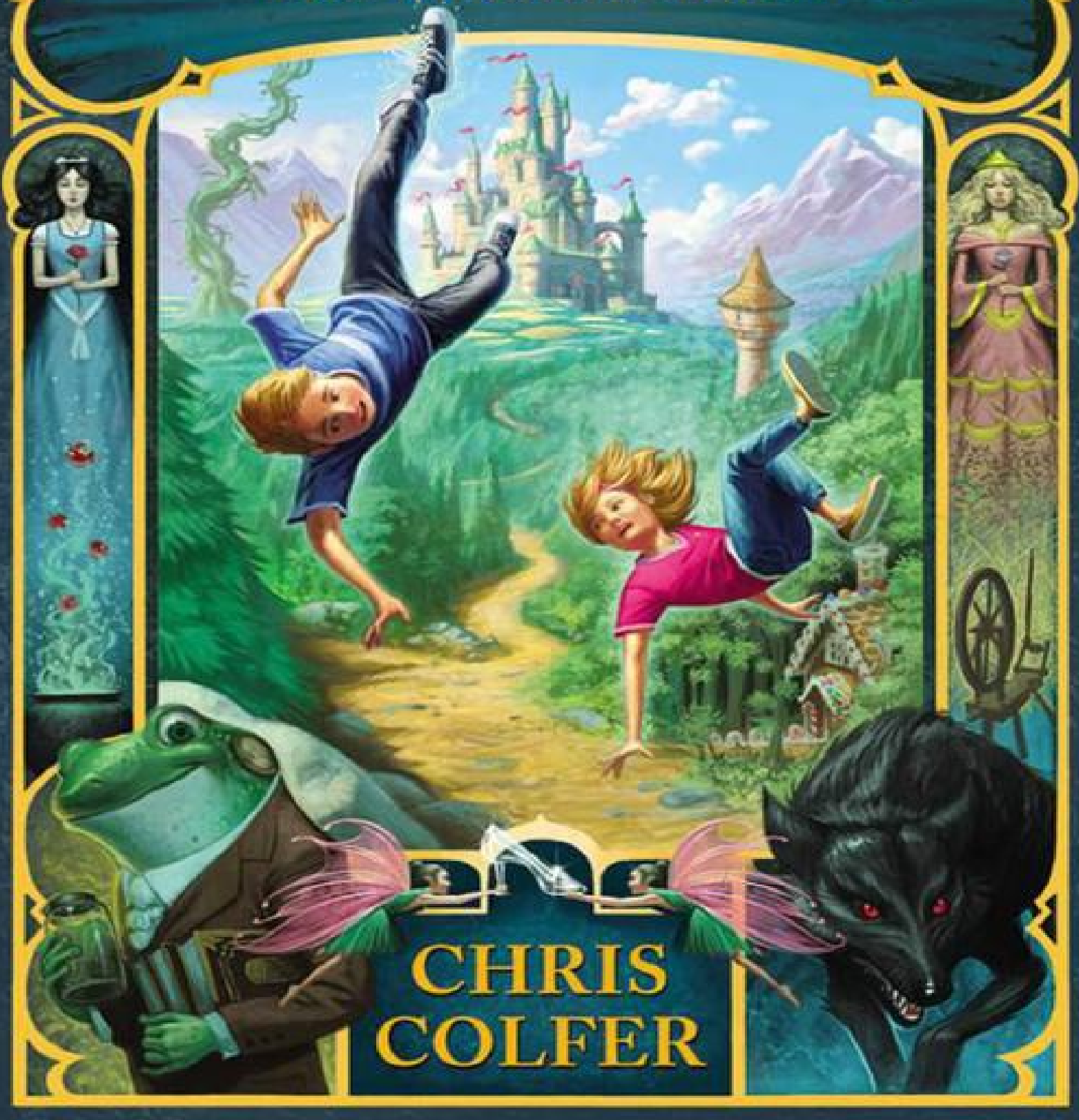
The Land of Stories

The Wishing Spell



CHRIS COLFER

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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“SOME DAY YOU WILL BE OLD ENOUGH TO START READING FAIRY TALES AGAIN.”

—C. S. LEWIS

PROLOGUE

visitor she had ever had, and she knew who it was without looking; there was only one person it could be.

"Hello, Snow White," the prisoner said softly.

"Hello, Stepmother," Snow White replied with a nervous quiver. "I hope you are well."

Although Snow White had rehearsed exactly what she wanted to say, she was now finding it nearly impossible to speak.

"I heard that you are the queen now," her stepmother said.

"It's true," said Snow White. "I've inherited the throne as my father intended."

"So, to what do I owe this honor? Have you come to watch me wither away?" her stepmother said. There was such authority and power to her voice; it was known to make the strongest of men melt like ice.

"On the contrary," Snow White said. "I've come to understand."

"To understand *what*?" her stepmother asked harshly.

"Why…" Snow White hesitated. "Why you did what you did."

And with this finally said, Snow White felt a weight lift off of her shoulders. She had finally asked the question that had been so strongly on her mind. Half of the challenge was over.

"There are many things about this world that you don't understand," the stepmother said, and turned to look at her stepdaughter.

It was the first time in a long time that Snow White had seen her stepmother's face. It was the face of a woman who had once possessed beauty without flaw, and the face of a woman who had once been queen. Now, the woman sitting before her was just a prisoner whose looks had faded into a permanent, sorrowful scowl.

"That may be," Snow White said. "But can you blame me for trying to find some sort of reason behind your actions?"

The recent years of Snow White's life had become the most scandalous of the kingdom's royal history. Everyone knew the story of the fair princess who'd taken refuge with the Seven Dwarfs while hiding from her jealous stepmother. Everyone knew of the infamous poisoned apple and the dashing prince who had saved Snow White from a false death.

The story was simple, but the aftermath was not. Even with a new marriage and a monarchy to occupy her time, Snow White found herself constantly wondering if the theories of her stepmother's vanity were true. Something inside the new queen refused to believe that someone could be so malicious.

"Do you know what they're calling you out there?" Snow White asked. "Outside these prison walls the world refers to you as the *Evil Queen*."

"If that is what the world has labeled me, then that is the name I shall learn to live with," the Evil Queen said. "Once the world has made a decision, there is little anyone can do to change its mind."

Snow White was astonished by how little her stepmother cared, but Snow White needed her to care. She needed to know there was some humanity left in her.

"They wanted to execute you after they discovered your crimes against me! The whole kingdom wanted you dead!" Snow White's voice faded to a faint whisper as she fought off the emotions building up inside her. "But I wouldn't allow it. I couldn't…"

"Am I supposed to thank you for sparing me?" the Evil Queen asked. "If you expect someone to fall at your feet and express gratitude, you've come to the wrong cell."

"I didn't do it for you. I did it for myself," Snow White said. "Like it or not, you are the only mother I have ever known. I refuse to believe that you are the soulless monster the rest of the world claims you to be. Whether it's true or not, I believe there is a heart deep down inside of you."

Tears rolled down Snow White's pale face. She had promised herself she would stay strong, but she had lost control of her emotions once she was in her stepmother's presence.

"Then I'm afraid you're wrong," the Evil Queen said. "The only soul I've ever had died a long time ago, and the only heart you'll find in my possession is a heart of stone."

The Evil Queen did indeed have a heart of stone, but not inside her. A rock in the shape and size of a human heart was on a small table in the corner of the cell. It was the only item the Evil Queen had been permitted to keep when she was arrested.

Snow White recognized the stone from her childhood. It had always been very precious to her stepmother, and the Evil Queen had never let it out of her sight. Snow White had never been allowed to touch it or hold it, but nothing was stopping her now.

She walked across the cell, picked it up, and curiously stared down at it. It brought back so many memories. All the neglect and sadness her stepmother had caused her as a child rushed through her.

"All my life I only wanted one thing," Snow White said. "Your love. When I was a girl, I used to spend hours hiding in the palace just hoping you would notice I was missing, but you never did. You spent your days in your chambers with your mirrors and your skin creams and this stone. You spent more time with strangers with anti-aging methods than you did with your own daughter. But why?"

The Evil Queen did not answer.

"You tried to kill me four times, three of which you attempted yourself," Snow White said, shaking her head in disbelief. "When you dressed as an old woman and came to me at the dwarfs' cottage, I knew it was you. I knew you were dangerous, but I kept letting you in. I kept hoping that you would change. I let you harm me."

Snow White had never confessed this to anyone, and she couldn't help but bury her face in the palms of her hands and cry after saying it.

"You think *you* know heartbreak?" the Evil Queen said so sharply that it startled her stepdaughter. "You know *nothing* of pain. You never received affection from me, but from the moment you were born you were loved by the whole kingdom. *Others*, however, are not so fortunate. *Others*, Snow White, sometimes have the only loves they've ever known taken from them."

Snow White didn't know what to say. What love was she referring to?

"Are you speaking of my father?" Snow White asked.

The Evil Queen closed her eyes and shook her head. "Naïveté is such a privileged trait," she said. "Believe it or not, Snow White, I had my own life before I came into yours."

Snow White grew quiet and slightly ashamed. Of course she knew her stepmother had had a life prior to marrying her father, but she had never considered what it had consisted of. Her stepmother had always been such a private person, Snow White never had reason to.

"Where is my mirror?" the Evil Queen demanded.

"It's to be destroyed," Snow White told her.

Suddenly, the Evil Queen's stone became much heavier in Snow White's hand. Snow White didn't know if this was really happening, or if she was just imagining it. Her arm became tired from holding the stone heart, and she had to put it aside.

"There's so much you're not telling me," Snow White said. "There are so many things you've kept

from me all these years."

The Evil Queen lowered her head and stared at the ground. She remained silent.

"I may be the only person in the world with any compassion for you. Please tell me it isn't going to waste," Snow White pleaded. "If there were events in your past that influenced your recent decisions, please explain them to me."

Still, there was no response.

"I'm not leaving here until you tell me!" Snow White yelled, raising her voice for the first time in her life.

"Fine," the Evil Queen said.

Snow White took a seat on another stool in the cell. The Evil Queen waited a moment before beginning, and Snow White's anticipation grew.

"Your story will forever be romanticized," she told Snow White. "No one will ever think twice about mine. I will continue to be degraded into nothing but a grotesque villain until the end of time. But what the world fails to realize is that a *villain* is just a *victim* whose story hasn't been told. Everything I have done, my life's work and my crimes against you, has all been for *him*."

Snow White felt her own heart grow heavy. Her head was spinning, and curiosity had taken over her entire body.

"Who?" she asked so quickly that she forgot to hold back the desperation in her voice.

The Evil Queen closed her eyes and let her memories surface. Images of places and people from her past flew out from the back of her mind like fireflies in a cave. There was so much she had seen in her younger years, so many things she wished she remembered, and so many things she wished to forget.

"I will tell you about my past, or at least the past of someone I once was," the Evil Queen said. "But consider yourself warned. My story is not one that ends with a happily-ever-after."

CHAPTER ONE

ONCE UPON A TIME

Once upon a time…" Mrs. Peters said to her sixth-grade class. "These are the most magical words our world has ever known and the gateway into the greatest stories ever told. They're an immediate calling to anyone who hears them—a calling into a world where everyone is welcome and anything can happen. Mice can become men, maids can become princesses, and they can teach valuable lessons in the process."

Alex Bailey eagerly sat straight up in her seat. She usually enjoyed her teacher's lessons, but *this* was something especially close to her heart.

"Fairy tales are much more than silly bedtime stories," the teacher continued. "The solution to almost every problem imaginable can be found in the outcome of a fairy tale. Fairy tales are life lessons disguised with colorful characters and situations.

" 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf ' teaches us the value of a good reputation and the power of honesty. 'Cinderella' shows us the rewards of having a good heart. 'The Ugly Duckling' teaches us the meaning of inner beauty."

Alex's eyes were wide, and she nodded in agreement. She was a pretty girl with bright blue eyes and short strawberry-blonde hair that was always kept neatly out of her face with a headband.

The way the other students stared at their teacher, as if the lesson being taught were in another language, was something Mrs. Peters had never grown accustomed to. So, Mrs. Peters would often direct entire lessons to the front row, where Alex sat.

Mrs. Peters was a tall, thin woman who always wore dresses that resembled old, patterned sofas. Her hair was dark and curly and sat perfectly on the top of her head like a hat (and her students often thought it was). Through a pair of thick glasses, her eyes were permanently squinted from all the judgmental looks she had given her classes over the years.

"Sadly, these timeless tales are no longer relevant in our society," Mrs. Peters said. "We have traded their brilliant teachings for small-minded entertainment like television and video games. Parents now let obnoxious cartoons and violent movies influence their children.

"The only exposure to the tales some children acquire are versions bastardized by film companies. Fairy tale 'adaptations' are usually stripped of every moral and lesson the stories were originally intended to teach, and replaced with singing and dancing forest animals. I recently read that films are being created depicting Cinderella as a struggling hip-hop singer and Sleeping Beauty as a warrior princess battling zombies!"

"Awesome," a student behind Alex whispered to himself.

Alex shook her head. Hearing this made her soul hurt. She tried to share her disapproval with her fellow classmates but, sadly, her concern was not reciprocated.

"I wonder if the world would be a different place if everyone knew these tales in the way the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen intended them to be known," Mrs. Peters said. "I wonder if people would learn from the Little Mermaid's heartbreak when she dies at the end of her real story. I wonder if there would be so many kidnappings if children were shown the true dangers that Little Red Riding Hood faced. I wonder if delinquents would be so inclined to misbehave if they knew about the consequences Goldilocks caused for herself with the Three Bears.

“There is so much to learn and prevent for our futures if we just open our eyes to past teachings. Perhaps if we embraced fairy tales as much as we could, it would be much easier to find our own happily-ever-afters.”

If Alex had her way, Mrs. Peters would be rewarded with thunderous applause after each lesson she gave. Unfortunately, all that followed her classes was a mutual sigh of relief among the students, thankful that they were over. “Let’s see how well you all know your fairy tales,” the teacher said with a smile, and began pacing the room. “In ‘Rumpelstiltskin,’ what did the young maiden’s father tell the king that his daughter could spin hay into? Does anyone know?”

Mrs. Peters scanned the classroom like a shark looking for wounded fish. Only one student raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss Bailey?” Mrs. Peters called.

“He claimed she could spin hay into gold,” Alex said.

“Very good, Miss Bailey,” Mrs. Peters said. If she had a favorite student—not that she would ever admit to having one—Alex would have been it.

Alex was always eager to please. She was the definition of a bookworm. It didn’t matter what time of day it was—before school, during school, after school, before bed—she was always reading. She had a thirst for knowledge and, because of it, Alex was usually the first person to answer Mrs. Peters’s questions.

She tried her best to impress her classmates with every chance she got, putting extra effort into each book report and class presentation she was assigned. However, this usually annoyed the other students, and Alex was often teased for it.

She constantly heard other girls making fun of her behind her back. She usually spent lunch alone under a tree somewhere with an open library book. Although she would never tell anyone, Alex was so lonely that sometimes it hurt.

“Now, can anyone tell me what the compromise was that the maiden made with Rumpelstiltskin?”

Alex waited a moment before putting her hand up. She didn’t want to seem like a *total* teacher’s pet.

“Yes, Miss Bailey?”

“In exchange for turning the hay into gold, the maiden promised to give Rumpelstiltskin her first-born child when she became queen,” Alex explained.

“That’s a pretty steep deal,” said a boy behind Alex.

“What’s a creepy old short man want with a baby anyway?” a girl next to him asked.

“Obviously, he couldn’t adopt with a name like Rumpelstiltskin,” another student added.

“Did he eat the baby?” someone else asked nervously.

Alex turned around to face her clueless peers.

“You’re all missing the point of the story,” Alex said. “Rumpelstiltskin took advantage of the maiden because she was in need. The story is about the price of a bad negotiation. What are we willing to give up long-term in the future for something short-term in the present? Get it?”

If Mrs. Peters could change her facial expression, she would have looked very proud. “Nicely put, Miss Bailey,” she said. “I must say, in all my years of teaching, I’ve rarely come across a pupil with as much in-depth knowledge as—”

A loud snore suddenly came from the back of the classroom. A boy in the back row was slouched over his desk and drooling from the corner of his mouth, very much asleep.

Alex had a twin brother, and it was moments like these that made her wish she didn't.

Mrs. Peters diverted her attention to him like a paper clip to a magnet.

"Mr. Bailey?" Mrs. Peters asked.

He continued to snore.

"Mr. Bailey?" Mrs. Peters asked again, kneeling down closer to him.

He let out another enormous snore. A few of the students wondered how it was possible for such a loud noise to come out of him.

"Mr. Bailey!" Mrs. Peters shouted in his ear.

As if someone had lit a firework under his seat, Conner Bailey jumped back to life, almost knocking his desk over.

"Where am I? What happened?" Conner asked in a panicked state of confusion. His eyes darted around the room while his brain tried to remember where he was.

Like his sister, he also had bright blue eyes and strawberry-blond hair. His face was round and freckled and, at the moment, slightly smushed to one side like a basset hound when it first wakes up from a nap.

Alex couldn't have been more embarrassed by her brother. Besides sharing looks and a birth date, she and her brother couldn't have been more different. Conner may have had a lot of friends, but unlike his sister, he had trouble in school… mostly trouble staying awake.

"I'm so glad you could rejoin us, Mr. Bailey," Mrs. Peters said sternly. "Did you have a nice nap?"

Conner turned bright red.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Peters," he apologized, trying to be as genuine as possible. "Sometimes when you talk for long periods of time, I doze off. No offense. I can't help it."

"You fall asleep in my class at least twice a week," Mrs. Peters reminded him.

"Well, you *do* talk a lot." Before he could stop himself from saying it, Conner knew it was the wrong thing to say. A few of the students had to bite their hands to stop from laughing.

"I recommend you stay awake while I teach, Mr. Bailey," Mrs. Peters threatened. Conner had never seen anyone squint their eyes so tight without shutting them before. "Unless you know enough about fairy tales to teach this lesson yourself," she added.

"I probably do," Conner said. Once again, he spoke without thinking. "I mean, I know a lot about this stuff, that's all."

"Oh, really?" Mrs. Peters never backed down from a challenge, and every student's worst nightmare was that they'd be her challenger. "All right, Mr. Bailey, if you're so knowledgeable, answer this question."

Conner gulped.

"In the original tale of Sleeping Beauty, how many years does the princess sleep before she is awoken by true love's first kiss?" Mrs. Peters asked, studying his face.

All eyes were on him, impatiently waiting for the slightest indication that he didn't know the answer. But fortunately for Conner, he did.

"One hundred," Conner answered. "Sleeping Beauty slept for one hundred years. That's why the castle grounds were covered in vines and stuff, because the curse affected everyone in the kingdom, and there was no one to garden."

Mrs. Peters didn't know what to say or do. She frowned down at him, immensely surprised. This

was the first time he had ever been correct when she'd put him on the spot, and she certainly hadn't expected it.

"Try to stay conscious, Mr. Bailey. Lucky for you, I used my last detention slip this morning, but I can always request more," Mrs. Peters said, and promptly walked to the front of the classroom to continue her lesson.

Conner sighed with relief, and the red drained from his face. His eyes met his sister's; even she was surprised he had gotten the answer right. Alex hadn't expected Conner to remember any fairy tales….

"Now, class, I want you all to get out your literature books, turn to page one hundred and seventy, and read 'Little Red Riding Hood' quietly to yourselves," Mrs. Peters instructed.

The students did as they were told. Conner made himself as comfortable as possible at his desk and began reading. The story, the pictures, and the characters were all so familiar to him.

One of the things Alex and Conner looked forward to the most when they were very young had been the trips to see their grandmother. She lived up in the mountains in the heart of the woods in a tiny house that could best be described as a cottage, if such a thing still existed.

It was a long journey, a few hours by car, but the twins loved every minute of it. Their anticipation would grow as they traveled up the windy roads and through the endless trees, and when they crossed a yellow bridge, the twins would excitedly exclaim, "We're almost there! We're almost there!"

Once they arrived, their grandmother would greet them at the door with open arms and hugs so tight they would almost pop.

"Look at you two! You've both grown a foot since the last time I saw you!" Grandma would say, even if they hadn't, and then would lead them inside, where a freshly baked batch of cookies waited for them.

Their father had grown up in the woods and would spend hours each day telling the twins his adventures as a kid: all the trees he'd climbed, all the streams he'd swum, and all the ferocious animals he'd barely escaped from. Most of his retellings were highly exaggerated, but they loved this time with him more than anything else in the world.

"Someday, when you're older, I'll take you to all the secret places where I used to play," their father would tease them. He was a tall man with kind eyes that would wrinkle whenever he smiled, and he smiled quite a bit, especially when he was teasing the twins.

At night the twins' mother would help their grandmother cook dinner and, after they had eaten, as soon as the dishes were done, the family would sit around the fireplace. Their grandmother would open her big storybook, and she and their father would take turns reading the twins fairy tales until they fell asleep. Sometimes the Bailey family would be up until sunrise.

They told the stories with such detail and passion that it didn't matter how many times the twins heard the same story. They were the best memories any child could ask for.

Unfortunately, the twins hadn't been back to their grandmother's cottage in a very long time….

"MR. BAILEY!" Mrs. Peters shouted. Conner had dozed off again.

"Sorry, Mrs. Peters!" he bellowed back, sitting straight up in his seat like a soldier on guard. If looks could kill, Conner would have been dead from the scowl she was sending him.

"What did we think of the *real* Little Red Riding Hood?" the teacher asked her class.

A girl with frizzy hair and thick braces raised her hand.

"Mrs. Peters?" the frizzy-haired girl asked. "I'm confused."

"And *why* is that?" Mrs. Peters said, as if asking, "What on earth could you possibly be confused about, idiot?"

"Because, it says the Big Bad Wolf is killed by the Hunter," the frizzy-haired girl explained. "I always thought the wolf was just upset because the other wolves in his pack made fun of his snout, and he and Little Red Riding Hood became friends in the end. At least, that's what happened in the cartoon I used to watch when I was little."

Mrs. Peters rolled her eyes so far into the back of her head, she could have seen what was behind her.

"That," she said with a clenched jaw, "is exactly why we're having this lesson."

The frizzy-haired girl became wide-eyed and sad. How could something so dear to her have been so wrong?

"For homework," Mrs. Peters said, and the room unanimously slumped in their seats, "you are to pick your favorite fairy tale and write a paper, due tomorrow, on the real lesson the tale is trying to teach us."

Mrs. Peters went to her desk, and the students began working on their assignment with the little class time remaining.

"Mr. Bailey?" Mrs. Peters summoned Conner to her desk. "A word."

Conner was in deep trouble, and he knew it. He cautiously stood up and walked to Mrs. Peters's desk. The other students gave him sorrowful looks as he walked by, as if he were walking to his executioner.

"Yes, Mrs. Peters?" Conner asked.

"Conner, I'm trying to be very sensitive about your *family situation*," Mrs. Peters said, glaring at him over the frames of her glasses.

Family situation. Two words Conner had heard too many times in the last year.

"However," Mrs. Peters continued, "there is certain behavior I just will not tolerate in my classroom. You're constantly falling asleep in class, you don't pay attention, not to mention you quiz and test very poorly. Your sister seems to be functioning just fine. Perhaps you could follow her example?"

It was a comparison that felt like a kick in the stomach every time someone made it. Indeed, Conner was not his sister by any means, and he was always punished because of it.

"If this continues, I will be forced to have a meeting with your mother, do you understand?" Mrs. Peters warned him.

"Yes, sir—*I mean ma'am! I meant ma'am!* Sorry." It just hadn't been his best day.

"Okay, then. You may have a seat."

Conner slowly walked back to his seat, his head hanging slightly lower than it had all day. More than anything, he hated feeling like a failure.

Alex had watched the entire conversation between her brother and their teacher. As much as her brother embarrassed her, she did feel for him as only a sister could.

Alex flipped through her literature book, deciding on which story to write about. The pictures weren't as colorful and exciting as they had been in her grandmother's book, but seeing all the characters she had grown up reading about made her feel at home, a feeling that had recently become a rarity.

If only fairy tales were real, she thought. *Somebody could wave a wand and magically make things how they used to be.*

CHAPTER TWO

THE LONGER WALK HOME

I'm so excited about this lesson," Alex told Conner as they walked home from school. This was something Conner was used to hearing his sister declare, and it was usually his cue to stop listening.

"Mrs. Peters made a very good point, you know," Alex continued excitedly, speaking a mile a minute. "Think about everything children miss out on when they're deprived of fairy tales! Oh, how terrible for them! Don't you just feel awful for them? Conner, are you listening to me?"

"Yup," Conner lied. His attention was focused on an abandoned snail shell he was kicking along the sidewalk.

"Can you imagine a childhood without knowing all those characters and places?" Alex continued. "We're so fortunate that Dad and Grandma made such a point of reading them to us when we were little."

"Very lucky…" Conner nodded, although he wasn't exactly sure what he was agreeing with.

Every day after school, the Bailey twins would walk home together. They lived in a charming neighborhood that was surrounded by more charming neighborhoods that were surrounded by another series of charming neighborhoods. It was a sea of suburbia, where each house was similar to the next but uniquely different at the same time.

To pass the time as they walked, Alex would tell her brother everything on her mind: all her current thoughts and concerns, a summary of everything she had learned that day, and what she planned to do as soon as they got home. As much as this daily routine annoyed Conner, he knew he was the only person in the world Alex had to talk to, so he tried his best to listen. But listening had never been Conner's forte.

"How am I ever going to decide which story to write about? It's too difficult to choose!" Alex said, clapping her hands with excitement. "Which one are you going to write your paper on?"

"Um…" Conner said, whipping his head up from looking at the ground. He had to mentally rewind the conversation to remember what the question was.

" 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf,' " he said, choosing the first fairy tale that came to mind.

"You can't choose that one," Alex said, shaking her head. "That's the most obvious one! You have to select something more challenging to impress Mrs. Peters. You should pick something with a message hidden deeper inside it, one that isn't so on-the-surface."

Conner sighed. It was always easier to just go along with Alex instead of arguing with her, but sometimes it was unavoidable.

"Fine, I'll pick 'Sleeping Beauty,' " he decided.

"Interesting selection," Alex said, intrigued. "What do *you* suppose the moral of that story is?"

"Don't piss off your neighbors, I guess," Conner said.

Alex grunted disapprovingly.

"Be serious, Conner! That is *not* the moral of 'Sleeping Beauty,' " she reprimanded.

"Sure it is," Conner explained. "If the king and queen had just invited that crazy enchantress to their daughter's party in the first place, none of that stuff ever would have happened."

"They couldn't have stopped it from happening," said Alex. "That enchantress was evil and probably would have cursed the baby princess anyway. 'Sleeping Beauty' is about trying to prevent

the unpreventable. Her parents tried protecting her and had all the spinning wheels in the kingdom destroyed. She was so sheltered, she didn't even know what the danger was, and she still pricked her finger on the first spindle she ever saw."

Conner thought about this possibility and shook his head. He liked his version much better.

"I disagree," Conner told her. "I've seen how upset you get when people don't invite you places, and you usually look like you would curse a baby, too."

Alex gave Conner a dirty look Mrs. Peters would have been proud of.

"While there's no such thing as a wrong *interpretation*, I have to say *that* is definitely a misread," Alex said.

"I'm just saying to be careful who you ignore," Conner clarified. "I always thought Sleeping Beauty's parents had it coming."

"Oh?" Alex questioned him. "And I suppose you thought Hansel and Gretel had it coming, too?"

"Yes," Conner said, feeling clever. "And so did the witch!"

"How so?" Alex asked.

"Because," Conner explained with a smirk on his face, "if you're going to live in a house made of candy, don't move next door to a couple of obese kids. A lot of these fairy-tale characters are missing common sense."

Alex let out another disapproving grunt. Conner figured he could get at least fifty more out of her before they got home.

"The witch didn't live next door! She lived deep in the forest! They had to leave a trail of bread crumbs behind so they could find their way back, remember. And the whole point of the house was to lure the kids in. They were starving!" Alex reminded him. "At least have all the facts straight before you criticize."

"If they were *starving*, what were they doing wasting bread crumbs?" Conner asked. "Sounds like a couple of troublemakers to me."

Alex grunted again.

"And in your deranged mind, what do you think the lesson of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' is?" Alex challenged him.

"Easy," Conner said. "Lock your doors! Robbers come in all shapes and sizes. Even curly-haired little girls can't be trusted."

Alex grunted again and crossed her arms. She tried her best not to giggle; she didn't want to validate her brother's opinion.

" 'Goldilocks' is about consequences! Mrs. Peters said so herself," Alex said. Although Alex would never admit it, sometimes arguing with her brother was amusing. "What do you suppose 'Jack and the Beanstalk' is about?" she asked.

Conner contemplated a moment and slyly grinned. "Bad beans can cause more than indigestion," he answered, laughing hysterically to himself.

Alex pursed her lips to hide a smile.

"What do you think the lesson of 'Little Red Riding Hood' is?" she asked him. "Do you think she should have just *mailed* her grandmother the gift basket?"

"Now you're thinking!" he said. "Although, I've always felt sorry for Little Red Riding Hood. It's obvious her parents didn't like her very much."

"Why do you say that?" Alex asked, wondering how he could have possibly construed that from

the story.

"Who sends their young daughter into a dark and wolf-occupied forest carrying freshly baked food and wearing a bright jacket?" Conner asked. "They were practically asking for a wolf to eat her! She must have annoyed the heck out of them!"

Alex held back laughter with all her might but, to Conner's delight, she let a quiet chuckle slip.

"I know you secretly agree with me," Conner said, bumping her shoulder with his.

"Conner, it's people like you who ruin fairy tales for the rest of the world," Alex said, forcing the smile on her face to fade. "People make jokes about them, and suddenly the whole message is… is… *lost—"*

Alex suddenly stopped walking. All the color in her face slowly drained away. Something across the street had caught her eye, something very disappointing.

"What's the matter?" Conner asked, turning back to her.

Alex was staring at a large house. It was a lovely home, painted blue with white trim, and had several windows. The front yard was landscaped to perfection; it had just the right amount of grass, patches of colorful flowers, and a large oak tree ideal for climbing.

If a house could smile, this house would be grinning from ear to ear.

"Look," Alex said, and pointed to a For Sale sign next to the oak tree. A bright red stripe with the word *Sold* had recently been added to it.

"It sold," Alex said, slowly shaking her head from side to side in disbelief. "It sold," she repeated, not wanting it to be true.

The little color in Conner's round face drained, too. The twins stared at the house for a moment in silence, each not knowing what to say to the other.

"We both knew it would happen *eventually*," Conner said.

"Then why do I feel so surprised?" Alex asked softly. "I guess it had been for sale for so long, I figured it was just… you know… *waiting for us*."

Conner saw tears begin to form in his sister's eyes through the tears forming in his own.

"Come on, Alex," Conner said and kept walking. "Let's go home."

She looked at the house for a second more and then followed him. This house was only one thing the Bailey family had recently lost….

A year ago, just a few days before their eleventh birthday, Alex and Conner's father died in a car accident on his way home from work. Mr. Bailey had owned a bookstore a few streets away named Bailey's Books, but all it had taken was a few small streets for a big accident to happen.

The twins and their mother had been anxiously waiting for him at the dinner table when they got the phone call telling them their father wouldn't be joining them that night, or any night after that. He had never been late to dinner before, so as soon as the telephone rang, they all had known something was wrong.

Alex and Conner could never forget the look on their mother's face when she answered the phone —a look that told them, without saying a word, that their lives would never be the same. They had never seen their mother cry like she did that night.

Everything had happened so fast after that. It was hard for the twins to remember what order it all had happened in.

They remembered their mother making tons of phone calls and having to deal with a lot of paperwork. They remembered that their grandmother came to take care of them while their mother made all the funeral arrangements.

They remembered holding their mother's hands as they walked down the church aisle at the funeral. They remembered the white flowers and candles and all the sad expressions on everyone's faces as they passed. They remembered all the food people sent. They remembered how sorry people told them they were.

They didn't remember their eleventh birthday, because no one did.

The twins remembered how strong Grandma and Mom had stayed for them in the following months. They remembered their mother explaining to them why they had to sell the bookstore. They remembered that, eventually, their mother couldn't afford their beautiful blue house anymore, and they'd had to move into a rental house a little way down the street.

They remembered Grandma leaving them once they were settled into their new, smaller house. They remembered returning to school and how falsely normal everything appeared to be. But most of all, the twins remembered not understanding why any of it had to happen.

A full year had passed, and the twins still didn't understand it. People had told them it would get easier with time, but how much time were they talking about? The loss seemed to grow deeper each day without their dad. They missed him so much sometimes that they expected their sadness to swell out of their bodies.

They missed his smile, they missed his laugh, and they missed his stories….

Whenever Alex had had a particularly bad day at school, the first thing she would do when she got home was jump on her bike and pedal to her dad's store. She would run through the front doors, find her dad, and say, "Daddy, I need to talk to you."

It didn't matter if he was helping a customer or putting brand-new books on the shelves, Mr. Bailey would always stop what he was doing, take his daughter to the storage room in the back, and listen to what had happened.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" he would ask with big, concerned eyes.

"I had a really bad day today, Daddy," Alex said on one occasion.

"Are the other kids still teasing you?" he asked. "I can call the school and ask your teacher to have a talk with them."

"That wouldn't solve anything," Alex said through sniffles. "By publicly persecuting me, they're filling an insecure void caused by social and domestic neglect."

Mr. Bailey scratched his head. "So, what you're saying, sweetheart, is that they're just *jealous*?" he asked her.

"Exactly," Alex said. "I read a psychology book in the library today at lunch that explained it."

Mr. Bailey let out a proud laugh. His daughter's intelligence constantly amazed him. "I think you're just too bright for your own good, Alex," he said.

"Sometimes I wish I was like everyone else," Alex confessed. "I'm tired of being lonely, Daddy. If being smart and being a good student means that I'll never have friends, then I wish I was more like *Conner*."

"Alex, have I ever told you the story about the Curvy Tree?" Mr. Bailey asked.

"No," Alex answered.

Mr. Bailey's eyes lit up. They always did when he was about to tell a story.

“Well,” he started, “one day when I was very young, I was walking around the woods and saw something very peculiar. It was an evergreen tree, but it was different from any other evergreen tree I had ever seen. Instead of growing straight out of the ground, its trunk curved and wound in circles like a large vine.”

“How?” Alex asked, utterly entranced. “That isn’t possible. Evergreens don’t grow like that.”

“Perhaps someone forgot to tell that to the tree,” Mr. Bailey said. “Anyway, one day the loggers came and cut down every single tree in the area except for the Curvy Tree.”

“Why?” Alex asked.

“Because they figured it was unusable,” Mr. Bailey answered. “You could never make a table or a chair or a cabinet out of it. You see, the Curvy Tree may have felt different from the other trees, but its uniqueness is what saved it.”

“What ever happened to the Curvy Tree?” Alex asked.

“It’s still there today,” Mr. Bailey said with a smile. “It’s growing taller and taller and curvier and curvier every day.”

A tiny smile grew on Alex’s face. “I think I get what you’re trying to tell me, Daddy,” she said.

“I’m glad,” said Mr. Bailey. “Now all you have to do is wait for the loggers to come and chop down all your peers.”

Alex laughed for the first time all day. Mr. Bailey always knew how to cheer her up.

It took the twins twice as long to walk home since they’d moved into the rental house. It was a boring home with brown walls and a flat roof. Windows were few, and the front yard consisted only of a plain grass lawn that was barely alive because the sprinklers didn’t work.

The Baileys’ home was cozy but cluttered. They had more furniture than they had room for, and none of it matched the house because it was never intended to. Even though they had lived here for more than half a year, unpacked boxes were still lined up against the walls.

None of them wanted to unpack them; none of them wanted to admit they were staying as long as they actually were.

The twins immediately went up the stairs and into their separate bedrooms. Alex sat at her desk and started her homework. Conner laid on his bed and started a nap.

Alex’s bedroom could have been mistaken for a library if it weren’t for the bright yellow bed tucked away in the corner. Bookshelves of all heights and widths lined the room, holding everything from chapter books to encyclopedias.

Conner’s bedroom was more like a cave, in which he appropriately hibernated whenever he could. It was dark and messy; patches of carpet could be seen in between piles of dirty clothes. A half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich rested on the floor and had been there far too long for anyone’s peace of mind.

An hour or so later, the twins heard sounds that meant their mother was visiting from work, and they went downstairs to join her in the kitchen. She was sitting at the table while on the phone, flipping through a stack of envelopes she had just collected from the mailbox.

Charlotte Bailey was a very pretty woman with red hair and freckled skin that the twins undoubtedly had inherited from her. She had a huge, caring heart and loved her kids more than anything else in the world. Unfortunately, they hardly ever saw their mother anymore.

She was a nurse at the local children's hospital and was forced to work constant double shifts to support the family since her husband passed away. Mrs. Bailey was already gone before the twins woke up every morning and would get home after the twins had gone to sleep. The only time she had with the twins anymore was on the brief lunch and dinner breaks she spent at home.

Mrs. Bailey loved her job and loved taking care of children at the hospital, but hated that it took time away from her own. In a way, the twins felt they had lost both their parents after their dad's death.

"Hi, guys," Mrs. Bailey said to the twins, covering the receiving end of the phone. "Did you have a good day at school?"

Alex nodded positively. Conner gave her an overly enthusiastic thumbs-up.

"Yes, I can work a double this Monday," she said into the phone, speaking with someone from the hospital. "No problem," she lied.

Most of the envelopes she was looking through had bright red warning stickers saying FINAL NOTICE or PAYMENT DUE. Even working the hours she worked, Mrs. Bailey had to get creative with money sometimes. She put the envelopes facedown on the table, hiding them from the twins.

"Thank you," Mrs. Bailey said into the phone, and clicked it off. She turned to her children. "How are you guys?"

"Good," they both said passively.

Mrs. Bailey's "mom-tuition" turned on. She knew something was troubling them.

"What's the matter?" she asked, studying their faces. "You seem a little down."

Alex and Conner looked to each other, unsure of what to say. Did their mother know about their old house? Should they tell her?

"Come on," their mother said. "What is it? You can tell me anything."

"We aren't upset," Conner said. "We knew it was going to happen eventually."

"What?" Mrs. Bailey asked.

"The house sold," Alex said. "We saw it today on our way home from school."

There was a moment before anyone said anything. This wasn't news to Mrs. Bailey, but the twins could tell she was just as disappointed about it as they were and had hoped they wouldn't notice it.

"Oh, *that*," Mrs. Bailey said, brushing it off. "Yes, I know. You shouldn't be sad about it, though. We'll find a bigger and better house as soon as we catch up on things here."

And that was that. Mrs. Bailey wasn't a good liar, and neither were the twins. Still, Alex and Conner always smiled and nodded along with her.

"What did you learn in school today?" their mother asked.

"So much," Alex proclaimed with a huge smile.

"Not much," Conner mumbled with a scowl.

"That's because you fell asleep in class again!" Alex tattled.

Conner gave Alex a dirty look.

"Oh, Conner, not again," Mrs. Bailey said, shaking her head. "What are we going to do with you?"

"It's not my fault!" Conner said. "Mrs. Peters's lessons put me to sleep. It just happens! It's like my brain switches off or something. Sometimes even my old rubber-band trick doesn't work."

"Rubber-band trick?" Mrs. Bailey asked.

"I wear a rubber band around my wrist and snap it every time I get sleepy," Conner explained. "And I was positive it was foolproof!"

Mrs. Bailey shook her head, more amused than anything.

"Well, don't forget how lucky you are to be in that classroom," Mrs. Bailey said with a guilt-inducing "mom look." "All the kids at the hospital would like nothing more than to trade places with you and go to school every day."

"They'd change their minds if they met Mrs. Peters," Conner said under his breath.

The phone rang just as Mrs. Bailey was about to continue scolding her son.

"Hello?" Mrs. Bailey said, answering the phone. The worry lines on her forehead became very prominent. "Tomorrow? No, there must be a mistake. I told them I couldn't work at all tomorrow; it's the twins' twelfth birthday and I was planning on spending the evening with them."

Alex and Conner looked at each other with the same surprised expression. They had almost forgotten they were turning twelve the next day. Almost…

"Are you positive there's no one else who can cover it?" Mrs. Bailey asked, her voice more desperate than she wanted it to sound. "No, I understand…. Yes, of course… I'm aware of the staff cuts…. See you tomorrow."

Mrs. Bailey hung up the phone, closed her eyes, and let out a deep, disappointed sigh.

"I've got some bad news, guys," she told them. "It looks like I have to work tomorrow night, so I won't be here for your birthday. But I'll make it up to you! We'll celebrate when I get home from work the next night, all right?"

"That's fine, Mom," Alex said cheerfully, trying to make her feel better. "We understand."

"It's okay," Conner added. "We weren't really expecting anything special anyway."

The situation made Mrs. Bailey feel like the worst mother in the world, and their understanding made her feel even worse. She would have much rather watched them throw a fit or get angry or show any emotion appropriate for their age. They were too young to be *used* to disappointment.

"Oh…" Mrs. Bailey said, fighting back the sadness inside her. "Great. Then we'll have dinner… and get a cake… and have a nice night…. Now, I'm just going to go upstairs for a minute before I head back to work."

She left the kitchen and hurried up the stairs and into her bedroom.

The twins waited a beat before climbing up the stairs to check on her.

They peered into their mother's bedroom. She was sitting on her bed crying, with rolled-up balls of tissue in both her hands, talking to a framed photo of her late husband.

"Oh, John," Mrs. Bailey said. "I try to stay strong and keep our family going, but it's really hard to do without you. They're such good kids. They don't deserve this."

She quickly dried her tears once she felt the twins watching her. Alex and Conner slowly walked into her room and sat on either side of her.

"I'm so sorry, for everything," Mrs. Bailey said to them. "It just isn't fair that you've had to go through all of this at such a young age."

"It's going to be okay, Mom," Alex said. "We don't need anything special for our birthday."

"Birthdays are overrated anyway," Conner added. "We know things are tight right now."

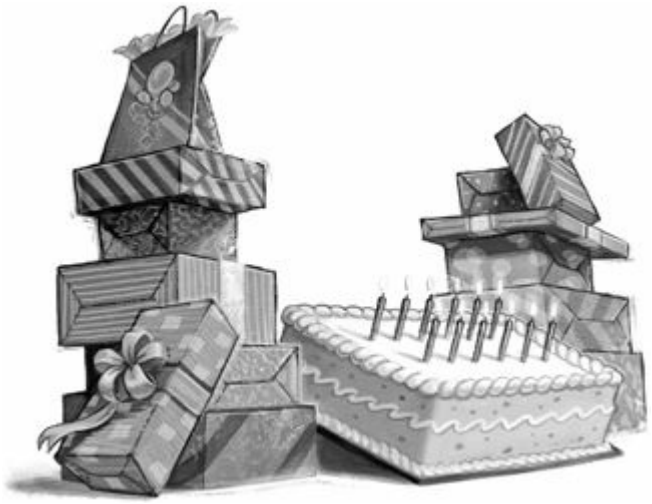
Mrs. Bailey put her arms around them. "When did you two become so grown-up?" she asked them with watery eyes. "I am the luckiest mom in the world!"

All their eyes fell on the photo of Mr. Bailey.

"You know what your dad would say if he were here?" Mrs. Bailey asked the twins. "He'd say, 'Right now, we're living in an ugly chapter of our lives, but books always get better!' "

The twins smiled at her, hoping this was true.

CHAPTER THREE



A BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

Pencils down," Mrs. Peters ordered from the front of the classroom. Her students were taking a math test, and she had been watching them like a prison guard the entire time. "Pass your tests to the front."

Conner looked down at the test as if it were written in ancient hieroglyphics. Most of his answers were blank, and he had just scribbled around the others to make it look like he had tried. He said a little prayer to himself and passed the test forward with the others.

The tests were all passed to Alex, who stacked them in a neat pile for Mrs. Peters. She always felt so refreshed after taking a test, especially one as simple as that one had been for her.

Her brother's test caught her eye since it was the one with the least amount of writing on it. Alex knew Conner always tried his best at school, but his best never seemed to be good enough. She looked back at him, wishing she could help him… and then it occurred to her: Maybe she *could*.

Alex looked up at Mrs. Peters and saw that she was busy looking at the notes in her lesson plan. Would her teacher notice if Alex quickly filled in a couple of answers for her brother? Was Alex even capable of doing something so blatantly wrong?

Was it considered cheating if you were doing it on someone else's test? Would the gracious gesture cancel out the offense in the grand scheme of things?

Alex was prone to over-thinking everything, so she just did it; she quickly filled in some of her brother's answers, making her handwriting slightly sloppier than it usually was, and handed the stack of tests to Mrs. Peters.

It was the most spontaneous thing she had ever done.

"Thank you, Miss Bailey," Mrs. Peters said, making eye contact with her. Alex felt like the pit of her stomach had fallen out of her body. The excitement she had felt from her impulse was now overshadowed by guilt.

Mrs. Peters had always trusted her; how could she do something so juvenile? Should she confess what she had done? What was the punishment for her crime? Would she feel this guilty for the rest of her life?

She looked back at her brother. Conner let out a long but quiet sigh, and Alex sensed her brother's sadness and embarrassment; she could feel his hopelessness as if it were her own.

The critical wheels in Alex's head stopped turning. She knew she'd done the right thing—not as a student, but as a sister.

"I want you all to get out your homework from last night," Mrs. Peters commanded, "and I would like you to briefly present your work in front of the class."

The teacher regularly surprised the class with impromptu presentations to keep them on their toes. She took a seat on a stool in the back of the room uncomfortably close to Conner's seat so she could keep an eye on his consciousness.

One by one, the students presented their assignments to the class. Besides a boy who thought "Jack and the Beanstalk" was about an alien abduction and a girl who claimed "Puss in Boots" was an early example of animal cruelty, all the students seemed to have interpreted the tales correctly.

"It was so hard to choose just one fairy tale to write about," Alex said as she animatedly presented her seven-page paper to the class. "So, I selected the story the theme of which is present in

virtually every fairy tale and every story ever written, 'Cinderella'!"

Her excitement was not shared by her peers.

"Many people have had issues with 'Cinderella,' saying it has anti-feminist elements," Alex continued. "But I think that's completely ridiculous! 'Cinderella' is not about a man saving a woman, it's about *karma*!"

Most of the class began daydreaming about other things. Mrs. Peters was the only person in the room who seemed even slightly interested in what Alex had to say.

"Think about it," Alex went on. "Even after years of constant abuse from her stepmother and her stepsisters, Cinderella remained a good person with high hopes. She never stopped believing in herself and in the good of the world. And although she married the prince in the end, Cinderella always had *inner happiness*. Her story shows that even in the worst of situations—*even when it seems no one in the world appreciates you*—as long as you have hope, everything can get better…."

Alex let her mind linger on what she had said. She questioned the last point she had made in her presentation. Was that really what "Cinderella" was about, or was it what she *needed* "Cinderella" to be about?

"Thank you, Miss Bailey! Very well said," Mrs. Peters said with the closest thing to a smile her face was capable of making.

"Thank you for your time," Alex said, and nodded to the class.

"It's your turn, Mr. Bailey," the teacher announced. She was sitting so close to him that he could feel the warm breath from her nostrils on the back of his neck.

Conner went to the front of the classroom, dragging his feet as if they were encased in concrete. He had never had trouble talking in front of the class, but he'd rather be anywhere in the world than presenting something in front of a teacher. Alex gave him an encouraging nod.

"I chose 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf,' " Conner said, going against his sister's advice from the day before.

Alex slumped in her seat, and Mrs. Peters rolled her eyes. This was very disappointing.

"I know you're all thinking I went with the easiest one," Conner said. "Except, reading it again, I don't think the story is about the importance of honesty. I think it's about *high expectations*."

Alex and Mrs. Peters both raised an eyebrow. Where was he going with this?

"Sure, the boy was a brat. I can't deny that," Conner continued, gesturing to the half-page paper he had written. "But can you blame him for having a little fun? Clearly his village was having a bit of a wolf problem, and everyone was stressed out about it. He was just a kid; did they really expect him to be perfect all the time?"

His presentation may have not been the best, but it certainly was catching the class's attention.

"And it makes me wonder, why was no one watching this kid?" Conner added. "Maybe if his parents had kept an eye on him, he wouldn't have been eaten. I think the story is trying to tell us to keep an eye on our kids, especially if they're pathological liars. Thank you."

Conner never tried to be funny. He was just painfully honest about his thoughts and opinions. This honesty always amused his classmates, but never his teacher.

"Thank you, Mr. Bailey," Mrs. Peters said sharply. "You may sit down now."

Conner knew he'd blown it. He took his seat, resuming his position under his teacher's cold stare and warm breath. Why did he even bother trying anymore?

It wasn't the end of a school day unless Conner left feeling completely worthless. There was only

one person who was capable of making him feel better when he felt this way. Conner only wished he were still around….

Mr. Bailey always knew when his son needed to talk to him. It didn't have anything to do with observation or intuition, but with location. Occasionally, Mr. Bailey would get home from work and find his son sitting up in the oak tree in the front yard with a contemplative look on his face.

"Conner?" Mr. Bailey would ask, approaching the tree. "Is everything okay, bud?"

"Uh-huh," Conner would mumble.

"Are you sure?" Mr. Bailey would ask.

"Yup," Conner would say unconvincingly. He wasn't as vocal about his troubles as his sister was, but you could see it in his face. Mr. Bailey would climb up the tree and have a seat on the branch next to his son and coax out what was troubling him.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?" Mr. Bailey would continue. "Did something happen at school today?"

Conner would nod his head.

"I got a bad grade on a test," he admitted on one occasion.

"Did you study for it?" his father asked.

"Yes," Conner said. "I studied really hard, Dad. But it's just no use. I'll never be as smart as Alex." His cheeks turned bright red with embarrassment.

"Conner, let me fill you in on something that took me a long time to learn," Mr. Bailey said. "The women in your life are always going to seem smarter; it's just the way it is. I've been married to your mother for thirteen years, and I still have trouble keeping up with her. You can't compare yourself to others."

"But I'm stupid, Dad," Conner said, his eyes filling with tears.

"I find that hard to believe," Mr. Bailey said. "It takes intelligence to be funny and tell a good joke, and you're the funniest kid I know!"

"Humor doesn't help with history or math," Conner said. "It doesn't matter how hard I try in school. I'm always going to be the dumb kid in class…."

Conner's face went white and expressionless; he stared off into nothing, so ashamed of himself that it hurt. Luckily for him, Mr. Bailey had an encouraging story for every situation.

"Conner, have I ever told you the legend about the Walking Fish?" Mr. Bailey asked him.

He looked up at his father. "The Walking Fish?" Conner asked. "Dad, no offense, but I don't think one of your stories is going to make me feel better this time."

"All right, suit yourself," Mr. Bailey said.

A few moments passed, and Conner's curiosity got the best of him.

"Okay, you can tell me about the Walking Fish," Conner said.

Mr. Bailey's eyes lit up as they always did just before he was about to tell a story. Conner could tell this was going to be a good one.

"Once upon a time, there was a large fish who lived in a lake by himself," Mr. Bailey told him. "Every day, the fish would watch longingly as a boy from the village nearby would play with all the horses and dogs and squirrels on land—"

"Is a dog going to die in this story, Dad?" Conner interrupted. "You know I hate stories when dogs

die—”

“Let me finish,” Mr. Bailey went on. “One day, a fairy came to the lake and granted the fish a wish —”

“That’s random,” Conner said. “Why do fairies always just show up and do nice things for people they don’t know?”

“Employment obligation?” Mr. Bailey shrugged. “But for argument’s sake, let’s say she dropped her wand in the lake and the fish retrieved it, so she offered him a wish as a thank-you. Happy?”

“That’s better,” Conner said. “Go on.”

“The fish, predictably, wished for legs, so he could play with the boy from the village,” Mr. Bailey said. “So the fairy turned his fins into legs and he became the Walking Fish.”

“That’s weird,” Conner said. “Let me guess, the fish was so freaky-looking, the boy never wanted to play with him?”

“Nope, they became great friends and played together with the other land animals,” Mr. Bailey told him. “But, one day, the boy fell into the lake and couldn’t swim! The Walking Fish tried to save him, but it was no use; he didn’t have fins anymore! Sadly, the boy drowned.”

Conner’s mouth hung open like a broken glove compartment.

“You see, if the fish had just stayed in the lake and not wished to be something else, he could have saved the boy’s life,” Mr. Bailey finished.

“Dad, that’s a horrible story,” he said. “How does a boy live by a lake and not know how to swim? Dogs can swim! Couldn’t one of them have saved him? Where was that fairy when the boy was drowning?”

“I think you’re missing the point of the story,” Mr. Bailey said. “Sometimes we forget about our own advantages because we focus on what we don’t have. Just because you have to work a little harder at something that seems easier to others doesn’t mean you’re without your own talents.”

Conner thought about this for a moment. “I think I get it, Dad,” he said.

Mr. Bailey smiled at him. “Now, why don’t we get down from this tree, and I’ll help you study for your next test?”

“I told you, studying doesn’t help,” Conner said. “I’ve tried and tried and tried. It never helps.”

“Then we’ll come up with our own way of studying,” Mr. Bailey told him. “We’ll look at pictures of people in your history book and make up jokes about them so you’ll remember their names. And we’ll create funny scenarios to help you with all of those math formulas.”

Conner slowly but surely nodded and agreed to it.

“Fine,” he said with a half smile. “But for future reference, I liked your story about the Curvy Tree much better.”

The walk home that day was very quiet. Alex could sense that her brother’s presentation had left him a little tense. She tried breaking the silence every few steps with supportive comments—or at least she thought they were supportive.

“I thought you made a good point,” she said sweetly. “Granted, it’s not a point I ever would have made.”

“Thanks,” Conner replied. She wasn’t helping.

“You may have overanalyzed it, though,” Alex said. “I do it all the time. Sometimes I read a story

and interpret it the way I want to, rather than the way the author wanted me to. It just takes practice."

He didn't respond. She still wasn't helping.

"Well, it's our birthday today," Alex reminded him. "Are you excited to be twelve?"

"Not really," Conner admitted. "It feels just like eleven. But aren't we supposed to be getting a new set of molars soon?"

"Come on, let's be positive," Alex insisted. "Even though we aren't doing anything exciting for our birthday, we should stay optimistic. There are plenty of things to look forward to! One more year until we'll be teenagers!"

"I suppose," Conner said. "Only four more years left until we can drive!"

"And six years left until we can vote and go to college!" Alex added.

That was all they could come up with. Their cheerfulness was hollow, and they both knew it, so they just stayed silent for the remainder of the walk. Even if they had the most extravagant party in the world waiting for them at home, birthdays were always going to be hard for them.

School had been predictable. The walk home had been typical. The whole day had seemed normal. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary to make their birthday feel special at all… until they got home and saw a bright blue car pull into their driveway.

"Grandma?" the twins said in perfect unison.

"Surprise!" yelled their grandmother, getting out of her car. She was so loud, the entire neighborhood could hear her.

The twins ran up to her with huge smiles on their faces. They only saw their grandmother a couple times a year and were stunned to see her in their driveway with no prior warning.

Their grandmother hugged both of them so tight they thought they'd pop. "Look at you two!" she said. "You both look like you've grown a foot since the last time I saw you!"

Their grandmother was a petite woman with long, graying brown hair that was pulled back in a tight braid. She had the warmest smile and the kindest eyes in the world, which wrinkled pleasantly when she smiled, just like the twins' dad's eyes had. She was cheerful and energetic, and exactly what the twins needed.

She always wore bright dresses and her signature shoes with white laces and brown heels. She was never more than a few feet away from her large, green travel bag and blue purse. And although their grandfather had died many years before, she always wore her wedding ring.

"We had no idea you were coming!" Conner said.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if you knew I was coming," Grandma said.

"What are you doing here, Grandma?" Alex asked.

"Your mom called and asked me to stay with you while she went to work," Grandma told them. "I couldn't let you spend your birthday alone, could I? Thank goodness I was in the country!"

Their grandmother was retired and spent most of the year traveling around the world with other retired friends. They traveled to mostly third-world countries and read to sick children in hospitals and taught other children of the communities to read and write.

"Come help me with the groceries," Grandma told the twins. She opened her trunk, and the twins began unloading bags and bags filled with food into the house. It was enough food to last them for weeks.

Mrs. Bailey was sitting at the kitchen table going through another stack of mail with bright red warning labels on them. She quickly pushed them to the side when the twins and their grandmother

paraded into the kitchen with the groceries.

"What's all this?" Mrs. Bailey asked.

"Hello, dear!" Grandma said to her. "I'm planning on cooking the twins a huge birthday dinner and wasn't sure what you had in the house, so I went to the store and picked up a couple things."

Their grandmother always had a talent for sugarcoating the truth.

"You didn't have to go to all this trouble," Mrs. Bailey said, shaking her head, unprepared for the kind gesture.

"It wasn't any trouble at all," Grandma said with a small but reassuring smile. "Alex, Conner, how about you go get your birthday presents from the front seat of my car, and I'll catch up with your mom for a second? But don't open them until tonight!"

They happily did as she asked. *Presents* was a word that had been absent from their vocabulary for a long time.

"See, I told you!" Alex said to Conner on their way to their grandmother's car. "Optimism always pays off!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah…" Conner said.

Half a dozen wrapped presents with bright bows, each marked to one of them, were waiting in the front seat of the car.

The twins returned inside with their gifts. Their grandmother and mother were still having a conversation that they most likely weren't supposed to hear.

"Things are still tough," Mrs. Bailey said. "Even after selling the bookstore, the house foreclosed, and we still have some debt and things unpaid from the funeral. But we're making it somehow. In a few more months we'll be back on our feet."

Grandma took Mrs. Bailey's hands into her own.

"If you need anything, dear, and I mean anything, you know where to find me," she said.

"You've already helped so much," Mrs. Bailey told her. "I don't know where we'd be now if it weren't for you. I could never ask you for anything else."

"You're not asking, I'm offering," Grandma assured.

The twins knew if they eavesdropped any longer, they'd be caught, so they walked back into the kitchen with their presents.

"Well, I have to go back to work," Mrs. Bailey said, and kissed both of the twins on the tops of their heads. "Have a great night, you guys! I'll see you tomorrow. Save some celebration for me!" She gathered her things and mouthed a meaningful *thank you* to their grandmother on her way out.

Grandma put her things away in the guest bedroom and returned to the kitchen, where she found the stack of bills Mrs. Bailey had put aside. She plopped the mail into her own purse with a smile. And that was that. Grandma loved helping people, especially if it was against their will.

"Let's get started on dinner, shall we?" Grandma said, clapping her hands.

Alex and Conner sat at the table and visited with their grandmother while she cooked up a storm. She told them all about her recent trips, the difficulties she and her friends experienced getting into and out of places, and all the interesting people she had met along the way.

"I've never met a person I didn't learn something from!" Grandma said. "Even the most monotonous people will surprise you. Remember that."

She was cooking so many different things, it was impossible to tell which ingredient was going where. Everything she did was so fast, and she used almost every pan and dish they had. With every

second that passed, the twins' stomachs growled louder and louder, and their mouths salivated more and more.

Finally, after a few hours of aroma-teasing torture, they ate. Alex and Conner had become so accustomed to frozen dinners and takeout, they had forgotten how good food could taste.

There were plates of mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese, oven-roasted chicken with carrots and peas, and freshly baked rolls. Their kitchen table looked like the cover of a cookbook.

Just when they thought they couldn't possibly eat any more, their grandmother pulled a huge birthday cake out of the oven. The twins were amazed; they hadn't even realized she had been baking one. She sang "Happy Birthday," and the twins blew out the candles.

"Now, open your presents!" Grandma said. "I've been collecting for you all year!"

They opened their boxes and were flooded with knickknacks from all the countries their grandmother had been to.

Alex was given copies of her favorite books in other languages: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in French, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in German, and *Little Women* in Dutch. Conner got a pile of candies and tacky T-shirts that said things like "My crazy Grandma traveled to India and all I got was this lousy T-shirt."

They both received several figurines of famous structures, like the Eiffel Tower and the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Taj Mahal.

"It's crazy to think that places like this actually exist in the world," Alex said, holding an Eiffel Tower in her hand.

"You would be amazed to know what's out there just waiting to be discovered," their grandma said with a smile and a twinkle in her eye.

A day with very low expectations had turned into one of the best birthdays they'd ever had.

As the night grew later, the visit with their grandmother began to come to a bittersweet end. Since their dad had died, they never saw their grandmother for more than a day at a time, and there were always a few months between each visit. She was always so busy with her travels.

"When do you leave?" Alex asked her grandmother.

"Tomorrow," she said. "As soon as I take you to school."

The twins' postures sank a bit.

"What's the matter?" asked their grandmother, sensing their spirits sink.

"We just wish you could stay longer, Grandma. That's all," Conner said.

"We really miss you when you're gone," Alex added. "Things are so gloomy here without Dad, but you make everything seem like it's going to be okay."

Their grandmother's constant smile faded slightly, and her gaze drifted off toward the window. She stared blankly into the night sky and took a deep breath.

"Oh, kiddos, if I could spend every day with you, I would," Grandma said longingly, perhaps more disheartened than she intended to show. "But sometimes life hands us certain responsibilities—not because we want them, but because we were meant to have them—and it's our duty to see to them. All I can ever think about is how much I miss you two and your dad when I'm away."

It was hard for Alex and Conner to understand. Did she not want to travel as much as she did?

Their grandmother looked back at them; her eyes were bright with a new idea.

"I almost forgot. I have one more gift for you!" Grandma said, and jumped up and skipped into the next room.

She returned carrying a large, old book with a dark emerald cover titled *The Land of Stories* in gold writing. Alex and Conner knew what the book was as soon as they saw it. If their childhood could be symbolized by an object, it was this book.

"It's your old storybook!" Alex proclaimed. "I haven't seen that in years!"

Their grandmother nodded. "It's very old and has been with our family for a long time," Grandma told them. "I take it with me everywhere I go and read it to the children in other countries. But now I want you two to have it."

The twins were shocked by the gesture.

"What?" Conner asked. "We can't take your book, Grandma. That's *The Land of Stories*. It's *your* book. It's always been so important to you."

Their grandmother opened the book and flipped through the pages. The entire room filled with its musty-paper aroma.

"That's very true," said Grandma. "This book and I have spent a lot of time together over the years, but the best times were when I read it to you. So I'd like to pass it down to you now. I don't need it anymore; I have all the stories memorized anyway."

She handed it to them. Alex hesitated but finally accepted the book from her grandmother. It didn't feel right to take it. It was like receiving an heirloom from a relative who was still alive.

"Whenever you're feeling down, on the days you miss your dad the most or when you just wish I were here, all you have to do is open it up and we'll all be together in spirit, reading along," Grandma told them. "Now, it's getting late, and you have school tomorrow. Let's get ready for bed."

They did as she asked. Even though they were too old for it, their grandmother insisted on tucking them into their beds like old times.

Alex took *The Land of Stories* with her to bed that night. She gently flipped through the old pages, being careful not to tear them.

Seeing all the colorful illustrations of the places and characters again made her feel like she was reading an old scrapbook of sorts. She loved spending time reading about fairy-tale characters more than anything. They had always felt so real and accessible to her. They were the best friends she had ever had.

"I wish we got to choose which world we lived in," Alex said, running her fingers over the illustrations. They were so inviting.

In her hands was a world unlike the one she lived in. It was a world unaltered by political corruption or technology, a world where good things came to good people, and a world she wanted to be a part of with all her being.

Alex imagined what it would be like to be a character in her own fairy tale: the forests she'd run through, the castles she'd live in, and the creatures she'd befriend.

Eventually, Alex's eyelids began to feel heavy. She closed *The Land of Stories*, placed it on her nightstand, clicked off her lamp, and began to drift off to sleep. She was just about to fade into unconsciousness when she heard a funny noise.

A low humming sound filled her room.

"What in the world?" Alex said to herself, and opened her eyes to see what it was. She saw nothing. "That's strange," she said.

She closed her eyes once more and began to drift back to sleep. The humming noise began to buzz through the room again.

Alex sat up and looked around her room and finally found what was making the noise. It was coming from inside *The Land of Stories* on her nightstand and, to her amazement, the pages were unmistakably glowing.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LAND OF STORIES

Alex had been acting strange all week. Conner had noticed right away, because she wasn't as talkative and upbeat as she usually was. Instead, she was very quiet and looked like she was in a deep state of confusion.

When they ate breakfast, she barely acknowledged it when her brother said, "Good morning." During school, she stopped raising her hand as much. After school, she barely said a word to Conner while they walked home. And as soon as they got home, Alex would run up the stairs and lock herself in her bedroom for the rest of the day.

"Are you feeling okay?" Conner eventually asked her. "You seem different."

"Yes, I'm just tired," Alex said.

Conner knew she must be tired, because she didn't seem to sleep anymore. Every time he had gotten up in the middle of the night to get a glass of water or use the bathroom that week, the lights in his sister's bedroom were still on, and he could hear her rustling about inside, working on something.

He didn't have to be a genius to know that his sister was dealing with more than just insomnia. He had seen enough health videos at school to know that girls his sister's age were expected to start going through mood swings and changes, but Alex had become another person entirely. Something very serious was bothering her, and she was keeping it to herself.

"Can I borrow some of your pencils?" a wide-eyed and wide-awake Alex asked him late one night.

It was like a peacock asking to borrow some feathers. He wasn't certain how to handle the request. Surely she wasn't still doing homework at this hour?

"Don't you have, like, hundreds?" Conner asked her.

"Yes… but I've lost them all," she said.

He shared the few that he had with her. Alex took them and quickly disappeared into her room again; she didn't even seem to mind that they were chewed on or were missing the erasers.

The next night, Conner kept waking up to a peculiar humming sound coming from Alex's room. It was quiet but had a strong vibration that he could feel as much as he could hear.

"Alex?" Conner said, knocking on his sister's door. "What is that sound? I'm trying to sleep, and it's driving me crazy!"

"It's just a bee. I shooed him out the window!" a frantic Alex responded from behind the door.

"A bee?" a puzzled Conner asked.

"Yes, a very big bee. It's mating season, you know, so they're quite aggressive this time of year," Alex called out.

"Err… all right…" Conner said, and went to bed.

But these happenings were nothing compared to the events during the next day at school.

"Can anyone tell me the names of the rivers that ran through ancient Mesopotamia?" Mrs. Peters asked the class during a history lesson. As usual, she had no volunteers.

"Anyone?" Mrs. Peters asked. Everyone was looking at Alex and expecting her hand to shoot into the air any second, but Alex was just staring at the floor. She wasn't paying any attention to anything.

"The Tigris and Euphrates," Mrs. Peters informed the class. "Can anyone tell me what the area

between these two rivers is believed to be?" She asked the question in Alex's direction, but it was no use: Alex was lost in her own thoughts.

"Miss Bailey, perhaps you know the answer?" Mrs. Peters pleaded.

"To what?" asked Alex, snapping out of her trance.

"The question," Mrs. Peters said.

"Oh…" Alex said. "No, I don't." She rested her head on her hand and continued staring at the floor.

Mrs. Peters and the rest of the class didn't understand what was happening. Alex *always* knew the answers. How was the class going to function without her?

"The cradle of civilization…" Mrs. Peters told the class, answering the question. "Many believe that mankind started there—*Miss Bailey!"*

Alex sat up quickly in her seat. The most shocking thing that had ever happened in the classroom had occurred: *Alex Bailey had dozed off in the middle of class!*

"I—I—I am so sorry, Mrs. Peters!" Alex pleaded. "I don't know what came over me! I haven't been sleeping very well lately!"

Mrs. Peters was staring at her as if she had just witnessed a gruesome rural animal give birth. "That's… that's all right," the teacher said. "Do you need to see the nurse?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm just a little sleepy," Alex said. "I promise that'll never happen again!"

Conner had been watching the whole thing like it was a train wreck. All he could do was shake his head. What had happened to Alex? Where was his real sister? She was turning into *him*!

The strange humming sound Conner had heard the night before suddenly filled the classroom. Alex sat straight up in her seat, anxious; her eyes grew larger than they had ever been before. A few of the other students looked around, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from.

"Can anyone tell me the technologies Mesopotamia brought into the Bronze Age?" Mrs. Peters asked, oblivious to the humming. "Anyone?" she asked again.

Alex's hand shot straight into the air.

"Yes, Miss Bailey?" Mrs. Peters happily called on her.

"May I use the restroom?" Alex peeped.

Mrs. Peters sighed with disappointment. "Yes, you may," she replied.

Before she had finished granting Alex permission to leave the classroom, Alex had already jumped out of her seat, grabbed her school bag, and headed out the door.

Conner watched his sister leave. His eyes were bulging with suspicion. Why had she taken her backpack with her to the bathroom?

He had to know what was going on. He was going to confront his sister here and now at school, where she had no place to run and no bedroom to lock herself into.

"Mrs. Peters?" Conner called out.

"Yes, Mr. Bailey?" Mrs. Peters asked.

"Can I see the nurse?" he asked.

"What for?" she asked.

He hadn't thought this far into his plan. "Um… my elbow hurts," Conner said.

Mrs. Peters stared at him blankly. She may have believed him more if he had told her he was a dinosaur. "Your elbow hurts?" she asked.

"Yes, really bad. I banged it on my desk, and now it's just killing me," Conner said, clutching his

perfectly fine elbow.

Mrs. Peters squinted and rolled her eyes, two of her trademark indications of annoyance in one expression. "Fine," the teacher said. "But I'm going to have to write you a pass—"

Conner was out the door before she could finish her sentence.

Meanwhile, Alex burst into the girls' restroom. She quickly looked underneath all the stalls to make sure she was alone. She zipped open her school bag, pulled out *The Land of Stories*, and set it on top of a sink; it was glowing and humming more than ever.

"Please turn off! Please turn off!" Alex said to the book. "I'm at school! I can't get caught with you here!"

The sound and shine slowly faded, and *The Land of Stories* returned to being just a normal book. Alex sighed with relief but panicked once more when someone else suddenly charged inside the restroom. It was her brother.

"Bees don't have mating seasons, Alex," Conner said with a tightened brow and his hands on his hips. "I looked it up. They come from colonies just like ants, even the big ones. They don't have schedules."

"Conner, what are you doing in here? You can't be in the girls' bathroom!" Alex shouted.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me what's going on!" Conner demanded. "You've been lying to me all week. I know something's up; I have 'twin-tuition.' "

" 'Twin-tuition'?" Alex asked sarcastically.

"I made it up," Conner said. "It means I know when something's bothering you, even if you tell me nothing is. At first I thought you were just having *girl issues—"*

"Oh, Conner, please!" Alex interjected.

"Then, after all the strange buzzing noises and late nights, I figured Mom must have gotten you a cell phone and didn't want me to know about it. But then I remembered you have no friends, so who would be calling and texting you?"

Alex grunted. Now he was being accusative *and* rude.

"But I know you well enough to know that it would take something much worse to make you act this way," Conner said. "You're quiet, you don't know any of Mrs. Peters's answers, and you're falling asleep in class! You're acting like *me*! So just tell me, what's your problem?"

Alex didn't say a word; she just stared at her feet. She was so ashamed at how she had been acting, but she knew no one would believe her if she told them why she had been that way, except maybe her brother.

Conner looked around the girls' bathroom. "Gosh, it's so nice in here. The boys' bathroom looks like the bottom of a hazardous waste barrel…. Wait, why do you have Grandma's book with you?"

"I don't know what's going on!" Alex burst into the loud and awkward tears one cries when exhausted and overly stressed.

Conner took a step back for his own protection. He had never seen his sister so hysterical.

"At first I thought I was hallucinating!" Alex said. "I thought maybe I was having a reaction to something Grandma made us for dinner. That was the first night it happened! But then it kept happening, so I knew it wasn't a reaction!"

"Alex, what are you talking about?" Conner asked.

"The Land of Stories *book!"* Alex yelled. "*It glows! It hums! Every day it gets louder and brighter!* I've lost so much sleep trying to figure out how and why it does it! It breaks all the laws of

science!"

"Ah…" Conner said with raised eyebrows. "Alex, I think we should go see the nurse—"

"You must think I'm insane!" Alex told him. "Anyone would come to that conclusion unless they saw it themselves. But I promise I'm telling the truth!"

"I don't think you're insane," Conner lied, starting to think his sister was *definitely* going insane.

"It happens once or twice a day," Alex said. "I was afraid Mom would find it, so I brought it to school; the last thing she needs to worry about is a possessed book lying around her house."

Conner didn't know what to say. He briefly imagined the future trips he and his mother would take to see his sister in the local asylum and the wisecracks he would make about the *cool white jacket* she got to wear.

Clearly, his sister had lost her mind, but after all they'd been through, he couldn't blame her. He kept thinking about how his dad would have handled this situation. What story would he have used to comfort Alex?

"Alex," Conner said with understanding eyes. "We've been through a lot in the last year. It's perfectly normal to feel overwhelmed and—"

The humming started again. They looked back at *The Land of Stories* on the sink; to Alex's relief and Conner's horror, it was glowing.

Conner jumped back against the wall as if he were in the presence of an explosive.

"The Land of Stories *book!"* Conner yelled. *"It glows! It hums!"*

"I told you!" Alex said.

Conner's mouth was opened so wide, it was almost touching his chest. "Is it radioactive?" he asked.

"I doubt it," Alex told him. She reached for the book.

"Don't touch it, Alex!" Conner shouted.

"Relax, Conner," Alex reassured him. "I've been dealing with it all week."

Using one finger, she flicked the book open, and the entire restroom was illuminated. All the illustrations and writing had disappeared, and the pages seemed to be made out of pure light.

Alex leaned closer to the book.

"Listen. Do you hear that?" she asked. "I can hear birds and leaves. I've never heard sounds come out of it before!"

Conner edged away from the wall and leaned down with his sister. The sound of birds chirping and trees blowing in the wind echoed off the tile and porcelain in the bathroom.

"How is this possible?" Conner asked. "Are you sure it doesn't have batteries or something?"

"My most educated analysis, with all means of science and technology in mind, is that it's magic," Alex said. "There's no other possible explanation!"

"Do you think Grandma knows about this?" Conner asked. "She had the book for years before she gave it to us. Do you think this has happened before?"

"I don't think Grandma would have given it to us if she knew what it was capable of," Alex said.

"You're right," Conner said. "She still cuts up my meat when she comes for dinner, because doesn't trust me with knives."

"There's more," Alex said. She reached into her school bag and pulled out a pencil. Carefully, she placed the pencil on the open book. It quickly sank into the glowing page and disappeared.

"W-w-where did it go?" Conner sputtered in utter astonishment.

"I don't know!" Alex said. "I've been dropping things into it all week! Pencils, books, dirty socks, and anything else I could find that I knew I wouldn't miss. I think it may be some kind of portal."

"A portal to *what*?" Conner asked.

Alex didn't have an answer. Of course, there was one location that she had hoped it might lead to.

The twins leaned down even closer to the book, their noses almost touching it. They had to squint because it was so bright.

Suddenly, a bright red bird flew out of the book. The twins screamed and ran around the room in panic. They bumped into each other, into the walls, and into the sinks as the bird zoomed above them; it was just as panicked as they were. Finally, Conner opened the bathroom door and the bird flew out of the room and into the world.

"You didn't say things came out of it, too!" Conner yelled.

"I didn't know! That's the first time that's happened!" Alex yelled back at him.

The book slowly dimmed and returned to normal. Conner's head was spinning. He couldn't believe all the things he had just witnessed. No wonder Alex was having such a rough week. He now felt his own sanity might be slipping, too.

"We have to get rid of this book!" Conner exclaimed. "After school we should ride our bikes down to the creek and toss it in so no one ever finds it."

"We can't get rid of it!" Alex said. "It's Grandma's book! It's been in our family forever!"

"Birds are flying out of it, Alex! I'm sure she'll understand!" he said. "What if a lion or a shark comes out of it next? I know it drives you crazy when you don't know about stuff, but this is one matter you need to let go. It could be more dangerous than we think! Who knows what could happen?"

She knew her brother was right, but there was something about the whole situation that intrigued her past the point of reason.

"I think you're overreacting," Alex said. "I don't want to get rid of it until I know more about it." She closed the book, put it back in her school bag, and walked out of the restroom.

"Alex! Don't walk away! Alex!" Conner called out after her.

The twins returned to class. All the students were silently reading their history books.

"Alex, we need to talk!" Conner whispered.

"Mr. and Miss Bailey, please have a seat and read the chapter on Mesopotamia," Mrs. Peters ordered from her desk.

"Yes, Mrs. Peters," Alex said, and then turned back to her brother and whispered, "We'll talk about it later, Conner!"

Conner let out a sound similar to something a bear would make.

"Mr. Bailey, how was the nurse?" Mrs. Peters asked.

"There was no need; my elbow started feeling much better before I got there," Conner said, holding the other elbow than the one he had previously claimed was hurting.

Mrs. Peters raised an eyebrow so high, it was almost above her.

The twins sat at their desks and opened their history books, but neither of them could actually read. Their thoughts were so loud, it was impossible to focus on anything.

Conner kept looking up at his sister, hoping she'd turn around so he could make some sort of gesture to make her understand how serious the situation was. Alex could feel her brother's eyes on the back of her head, so she remained facing forward, set on ignoring him.

And then, the worst possible thing that could have happened *happened*. *The Land of Stories* began

humming in the quiet classroom from the inside of Alex's bag.

She looked back at her brother, finally making eye contact. What were they going to do? Mrs. Peters had been so caught up in her lesson plan that she hadn't heard it earlier. Was it possible for her to miss it again?

"What is that noise?" Mrs. Peters demanded.

All of the students were looking around the room, wondering the same thing. Alex and Conner were terrified; they felt like their stomachs had fallen out of their bodies.

Mrs. Peters got up from her desk and started searching around the room, like a coyote sniffing out its prey. She walked up and down the aisles of desks, getting closer and closer to Alex.

"If anyone knows what that is, they'd better tell me before I find it," the teacher warned.

Alex could feel her heartbeat in her throat. There was no telling what could happen if her teacher found the book. She could only imagine what a fuss the school would make of the discovery…. Perhaps they'd call the local news stations…. Perhaps government officials would take the book away for experimental testing…. Perhaps her family would be taken away because they had been in such close contact with it….

Mrs. Peters arrived at Alex's desk.

"Miss Bailey, is there something in your bag?" she asked her.

All the color in Alex's face drained away. She needed a miracle!

Suddenly, a large history book flew from the back of the classroom and hit Mrs. Peters on the head, leaving a large dent in her curly hair. The entire class turned to the back of the room and saw Conner's extended hand. *He had just thrown a book at their teacher!*

Mrs. Peters's face turned bright red. A charging bull would have seemed harmless compared to the way she was looking at Conner.

"Mr. Bailey! What on earth has gotten into you?" she screamed. The whole school must have heard her.

For a brief moment, Conner saw his entire life flash before his eyes. He honestly thought he was about to die. His face was so white, he was almost transparent.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Peters!" Conner whimpered. "There was a bee! I didn't mean to hit you!" he lied.

Steam was practically coming out of the teacher's ears and nostrils.

"Detention, Mr. Bailey! For the rest of this week, next week, and the week after that!" Mrs. Peters said. She returned to her desk and immediately began filling out every detention slip she had in her possession.

Thankfully, the room had become so tense that everyone had forgotten about the humming sound and, even more thankfully, they hadn't noticed it slowly fade away. Conner's mission was accomplished. He knew he'd done the right thing—not as a student, but as a brother.

Soon, the bell rang, and all the students left their desks and filed out of the classroom—except for Conner, who remained seated. Alex walked up to him.

"Thanks for that," she said.

"You owe me one," Conner told her.

She nodded and then left the classroom to walk home alone. Conner remained seated until Mrs. Peters finished filling out the detention slips.

"Come here, Mr. Bailey," she said.

Conner approached her desk as if it were on fire.

"Throwing things in my classroom will never be tolerated; do you understand me, Mr. Bailey?" she said, heavily pronouncing each syllable of each word. "One more incident like that, and I'll have you expelled!"

He gulped and nodded. She handed him a large stack of detention slips.

"Your mother will need to sign all of these," Mrs. Peters told him.

He nodded again. "I'm really sorry," Conner said. "I hope I didn't hurt you." He was so genuine that even Mrs. Peters could sense his regret. She knew that, deep down, Conner had always been a good kid—a horrible student, but a good kid nonetheless.

"It's all right, Mr. Bailey," she said. "I believe I may have underestimated the effect your family situation has had on you and your sister. I'm going to contact your mother with a list of different after-school programs I think you and your sister should take part in, as well as a list of self-help books that may be beneficial."

Conner nodded in agreement.

"I think if you had someplace to escape to once in a while, it'd help you deal with whatever you're going through," she said.

Conner continued nodding. If there was ever a time in his life when he needed an escape from reality, it was now, and he was sure his sister would agree.

And then, like lightning, the thought hit him.

Oh my God, Alex! Conner thought. *She's gonna travel into the book herself! That's why she's been holding on to it! That's why she refused to get rid of it!*

Conner dropped all the detention slips and bolted toward the door.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Peters, I can't go to detention today! Something has just come up!"

"Mr. Bailey! Get back here right now!" she yelled after him, but it was too late. He was already gone.

Conner was running as fast as he could down the street. Alex had gotten so much of a head start, would he make it home in time to stop her? What if she was already gone by the time he got there? What if he never saw her again? His feet began to ache, a horrible pain grew in his side, and his heart felt like it was beating out of his chest, but he continued running. He just prayed he wasn't too late….

It hadn't been more than five minutes since Alex had gotten home when *The Land of Stories* began acting up again. She ran up the stairs to her bedroom and promptly shut the door behind her.

Alex took *The Land of Stories* out of her school bag and placed it on her bedroom floor. She opened the cover, and her room lit up from its golden glow. She smiled to herself. Alex had always hoped something magical would happen to her, and now something finally was.

She pulled out a pencil from her school bag and placed it on top of the book and watched it disappear. Alex looked around the room for other disposable things she could drop into the book. She was out of pencils, and the books left in her bookshelves were ones she wanted to keep. She looked down at her school bag; she did have plenty of *school bags*.

She placed her whole bag on top of the book and watched as it, too, slowly sank into the storybook. Where were all these things going? Was it transporting them to another part of the world? Would she find a pile of her school supplies in India or China?

Or did the book send the items someplace else entirely? Was it possible they were going to

another world? Was it the world that Alex secretly hoped for?

There was only one way to find out.

It was an idea she had managed to suppress all week. What if she went into the book? No, she couldn't possibly do such a stupid thing. What if she never came out?

But what if she stuck her hand into the book? What would happen? Would it hurt? Would her whole arm disappear? Alex's curiosity overruled her caution. She sat on her knees and bent over the book very carefully.

Alex started with just her fingertips. So far, so good. There was no pain; she only felt a warm, tingly sensation. Alex reached farther. She was wrist deep now, and still nothing had happened that worried her. She went farther; the book was up to her elbow. If the book hadn't been there, her hand would surely be sticking through the ceiling downstairs.

Alex leaned forward even farther, almost shoulder deep into the book. She moved her arm around, seeing if there was anything to grab on to inside it.

Suddenly, her bedroom door burst open, and Conner ran inside, sweating and out of breath. "Alex! Don't do it!"

He completely startled her. Alex lost her balance and fell—headfirst into the book!

"AAALLLEEEXXX!" Conner cried out to his sister. He jumped to the ground, trying to grab her foot before she disappeared entirely, but it was too late. Alex had fallen into *The Land of Stories*.

CHAPTER FIVE

FROM THE MOUTH OF A FROG

Alex was no longer in her bedroom. She was falling into a world of light.

She fell farther and farther, faster and faster. She was dizzy and scared. She screamed out for help but couldn't hear her own voice. Would she ever stop falling? Was she going to die? Was she dead? She wondered if she would ever see her family again.

She could hear birds chirping and trees blowing in the wind. The noise seemed to get closer and closer, but she just kept falling and falling, not knowing where she was falling to….

"Ouch!" Alex said, hitting the ground. Her impact was hard enough to hurt but not hard enough to seriously injure her. Had it not been for the rough landing, she would have thought she was dreaming for sure.

Alex quickly got to her feet. She felt her pulse to make sure her heart was still working; she was still alive, from what she could tell. She was so thankful to have finally stopped falling… but where exactly had she fallen to?

She was standing on a dirt path in the middle of a thick forest. The trees were tall and dark with bright green moss covering their trunks. The sun's rays shined through a light mist. Birds squawked from high in the trees and, if she listened closely enough, she could hear a tiny stream in the distance.

Alex spun around, looking in all directions. Her breathing increased as she took in her new surroundings. Was she overreacting or not reacting enough to what had just happened? And what exactly *had* just happened?

She looked up to see if there was an opening she had fallen through, hoping to see some sort of window into her bedroom, but all she saw were tree branches and the sky above her.

"Where am I?" she asked herself.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!" As if he had fallen right out of thin air, Conner landed hard on the ground beside his sister. He was pale and screaming, and his limbs were stretched out in all directions. "Am I alive? Am I dying? Am I dead?" he asked from the ground with his eyes tightly closed.

"You're alive!" Alex told him. She had never been so happy to see him.

"Alex, is that you?" Conner asked. He slowly opened his eyes one at a time and looked around. "Where are we?" he asked as she helped him to his feet.

"It looks like some kind of… forest," she said.

It was unlike any forest they had ever seen—in real life, at least. The colors were so vivid and the air was so crisp. It was as if they had fallen into a painting, a painting Alex was positive she had seen before.

"Look," Conner said, pointing at the ground. "All of our pencils!"

The path was littered with the pencils Alex had been dropping into the book all week. She also found her school bag and a few of her dirty socks in the middle of the mess. But where were all the books she had dropped into *The Land of Stories*?

"So this is where they all went!" Alex said.

"But where is *here*?" Conner asked. "How far away from home are we?"

Alex couldn't answer him. She was starting to become just as worried as he was. They were

worse than lost.

"This is all your fault, Alex!" he said.

"My fault?" Alex yelled. "We wouldn't be here if you had just knocked on my door instead of barging in like the house was on fire!"

"I knew you were planning this," Conner said. "I had to stop you!"

"I wasn't planning on going into the book. I was just testing it out!" Alex explained. "You didn't have to follow me here."

"Oh, sure! Was I just supposed to leave you in the book by yourself ?" he exclaimed. "What was I supposed tell Mom when she got home? 'Hi, Mom, hope you had a good day at work. Alex fell through a book. By the way, what's for dinner?' Give me a break!"

Conner began jumping upward as high as he could.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked.

"We fell. From. Somewhere. Up here. There's. Got. To be. A way. Back," he said, but all his jumping was pointless. Conner eventually tired himself out, and he took a seat on the ground against a tree trunk.

"What if we were transported to another country or something?" Conner asked; his forehead became more wrinkled the further he thought about it. "What if it took us to Canada or Mongolia or somewhere? How long is it gonna take for Mom or someone to find us?"

Suddenly, the ground started shaking. A powerful rumbling had consumed the forest. The branches of the trees shook, and the small rocks on the ground began jumping as something massive moved closer toward them.

"What's happening now?" Conner yelled.

"Let's take cover!" Alex said.

She grabbed her bag, and the twins ran off the path and into the forest a little way and took refuge behind a particularly wide tree.

They couldn't believe what they were seeing. A huge cavalcade of soldiers on white horses rode past them. Their armor was clean and shiny. They carried green-and-silver shields with large red apples painted on them and waved flags with the same design.

"Alex, did we go back in time?" Conner anxiously asked his sister. "That looks like something straight out of medieval times!"

The pencils were all obliterated under the horses' hooves. The soldiers were moving at such a fast and forceful pace that none of them noticed the awestruck twins peeking out from behind the tree.

Alex was fixated on their shields. A red apple was such an odd thing to be displayed on a shield, but there was something so familiar about it. She couldn't put her finger on it.

The rumbling slowly faded away as the soldiers disappeared down the dirt path. The twins both stayed behind the tree for a few moments, making sure the coast was clear.

"I don't know about you, but I've had about as much excitement as I can handle for one day," Conner told Alex.

A poster pinned to a nearby tree caught Alex's eye. She walked over to it and pulled it off the tree for further inspection. It was old, with faded writing, and a picture of a disgruntled-looking little girl with curly blonde hair was centered on it. The poster read:

Alex's face went white, and she stopped breathing for a moment; she had realized where they were. No wonder the trees had been so recognizable. She had seen pictures of them so many times growing up. The book had taken them to the exact place she had hoped.

"Is it possible?" she asked herself. The wheels in her head had never spun as fast as they were now.

"Is what possible?" Conner asked. "Do you know where we are?"

"I think so," Alex told him.

"Where?" Conner asked, fearing the answer.

"Conner, we went *into* the book," she explained, but he wasn't following her. "I think we're actually *in* the Land of Stories."

She handed him the Wanted poster, and he read it. His eyes grew as wide as a lemur's.

"No no no! This cannot be happening! This is crazy!" he said, shaking his head. He handed the poster back to his sister as if it were infected with rabies. He couldn't believe what she was saying; he didn't want to believe what she was saying. "Are you telling me we're in the fairy-tale world?"

"I'd recognize this forest anywhere! It's straight out of Grandma's book," Alex said with an unplanned smile. "But it makes perfect sense! Where else would it have taken us?"

"We just fell through a book! *Nothing* makes sense!" Conner said. "So, are we stuck here or what? How do we get home?"

"I don't have all of your answers, Conner," Alex said. "Don't forget, all of this just happened to me, too!"

Conner began pacing around the trees with his hands on his hips. "I can't believe I ditched detention and wound up in another dimension," he said.

Alex was rather grateful her brother had come after her. They had lived together all their lives and had been in the same classrooms since kindergarten. She didn't know if she could handle being in a different dimension by herself.

"I hope you're happy, Alex," Conner said. "I told you we should have thrown the book into the creek!"

"Enough with the blaming," Alex said. "It doesn't matter how we got here, the point is we're here now. What matters is finding someone who can help us get home!"

"Excuse me, may I help you?" said a proper voice behind the twins. They jolted at the sound of another voice besides their own. They turned around to see who it had come from, and once they saw, they both wished they hadn't.

Standing behind Alex and Conner was what could best be described as a frog man. He was tall, with a wide face, big, glossy eyes, and shiny green skin. He wore a dapper three-piece suit and carried a large glass jar of lily pads.

"Forgive me for eavesdropping, but I'm rather good with directions if you need some," he said with a very wide smile.

Alex and Conner were so petrified that they were paralyzed. If they needed any more evidence that they were in the fairy-tale world, this was their proof.

"You look awfully young to be in the forest by yourselves," the frog man said. "Are you lost?"

Conner let out a high-pitched squeal that lasted much longer than it should have. "Please don't eat us!" he said, and dropped to the ground in a fetal position.

The frog man looked down at him with a frown. "Young man, I have no intention of eating you," he said. "Is he always like this?" the frog man asked Alex.

Alex responded with a squeal almost identical to the one her brother had made.

"I know, I know. Don't worry; I'm used to people screaming at me," the frog man told them. "Get it out of your systems. The shock will only last a minute."

"We're sorry!" Alex finally managed to say. "It's just that, where we're from there aren't many… um… frog people? Sorry if that isn't the politically correct term for what you are!"

Conner let out another high-pitched noise. It wasn't a scream this time, but it was embarrassing nonetheless.

The frog man studied their faces and paid special attention to their clothes. "Where exactly are you from?"

"Pretty far from here," Alex said.

A piercing set of wolf howls echoed through the forest. All three of them jumped at the sound. The frog man looked around the trees with fear in his big, glossy eyes.

"It's getting dark," the frog man said. "We'd better get inside. Please, follow me home. It's just a few minutes' walk from here."

"Nice try!" Conner said.

The wolf howls echoed again. This time they were much louder than the first. Wherever the wolves were, they were getting closer.

"I know I look scary now," said the frog man to the twins, "but I'm nothing compared to some of the creatures that lurk around these woods at night. I promise I will not harm you."

There was such concern in his eyes, it was hard not to trust him. The frog man took off at a brisk walk deeper into the forest.

Alex nudged Conner. "We'd better follow him."

"Are you crazy? I'm not going home with the giant frog!" Conner whispered to her.

"What do we have to lose?" Alex asked.

"Besides our lives?" Conner said, but, despite his protests, he was dragged up by his sister and pulled in the direction the frog man was leading them.

The twins hurried behind the frog man for a good while. They zigzagged between trees and jumped over boulders and tree roots that stuck up from the ground. The deeper they went into the forest, the thicker the trees became. It got dark very quickly and was almost pitch-black by the time they reached the frog man's home.

Alex and Conner stayed close together. With every step they second-guessed if they had made a smart choice going with this strange creature.

"This way," he said.

The frog man brushed aside some dead vines growing over a large wooden door that was

camouflaged into the side of a small hill. He pulled the door open and led the hesitant twins underground. He looked back into the forest, making sure they hadn't been followed, before shutting the door behind him.

It was very dark underground. Alex and Conner were so close together, they could have been mistaken for Siamese twins.

"Forgive the mess. I wasn't expecting company," the frog man apologized, and lit a lamp with a match.

Alex and Conner didn't know what to expect of the frog man's home, but what they were seeing definitely wasn't it.

They were in a large room with dirt walls and a low, dirt ceiling. Roots from a tree growing above them grew down like a chandelier. A cluster of big, cushy chairs and sofas—many of the cushions had the stuffing sticking out of them—sat in the center of the room and were angled to face a small fireplace. Nearby, teacups and pots hung from hooks over a tiny kitchenette.

To Alex's delight, there were books everywhere. Shelves of books lined the dirt walls; piles of books were stacked on every available surface and on the ground; it was as if the room were infested with literature.

"Conner," Alex whispered close to him. "Look around at this place! It's like we're having our own Lucy and Mr. Tumnus moment!"

Conner looked around and saw what she meant. "If he offers us Turkish delight, I don't care what you say: We're getting out of here!" he whispered back.

"It's a little dirty, but it's cozy," the frog man said. "It's hard to find a landlord who will house a frog, so I did the best I could with what I had."

He placed his jar of lily pads on the mantel and immediately started a fire in the fireplace. He filled a teakettle with water from a pitcher, placed it over the fire, and took a seat in a big, white chair closest to it. He crossed his legs and folded his hands neatly in his lap. He was one proper frog.

"Please have a seat," the frog man said, gesturing to the sofa in front of him. The twins reluctantly did as he asked. The sofa was rather lumpy, so they had to shift around in their seats to get comfortable.

"What are you?" Conner asked the frog.

"Conner, don't be rude!" said his sister, elbowing him in the side.

"It's quite all right," the frog man said with a complicated smile. "I understand my appearance takes some time to get used to. Even I haven't fully adapted to it yet."

"You mean, you weren't always a… um… frog person?" Alex asked as politely as she could.

"Heavens, no," the frog man said. "I was cursed years ago by a very aggressive witch."

"Why?" Alex asked. She was fascinated by how casually he had said it.

"To teach me a lesson, I suppose," the frog man told her. "I used to be a very vain young man. The witch transformed my appearance so I would lose all of the things I took for granted."

His wide smile softly faded. It had obviously been a very long and painful experience for him, and he still had a sad sense of loss and longing about him. The twins had never seen a frog look so sad.

"I can't even imagine what that must have been like," said Alex, beaming with sympathy.

"Can we call you Froggy?" Conner asked with a small smirk.

"Conner!" Alex reprimanded.

"It's quite all right." The frog man nodded, and his smile returned. "I've learned that the more

people embrace their disadvantages, the less disadvantaged they become! Please, call me Froggy. I'd prefer it."

Conner shrugged and smiled.

"May I get you some lily pad tea?" Froggy asked the twins.

Both the twins nodded; they didn't want to be rude. Froggy retrieved the teakettle from the fire and hopped—literally—to the kitchenette and poured water into three teacups. He opened the jar on the mantel and dropped a lily pad into each teacup and stirred.

"Do either of you take flies with your tea?" he asked, reaching for another jar on his mantel, this one filled with dead flies.

"No thanks," Conner said. "Trying to quit."

"Suit yourself," Froggy said, and dropped a few flies into his tea. He handed them each a teacup and reseated himself across from them. They stared down at it for a few moments before deciding they'd at least pretend to drink it.

"What are your names?" Froggy asked the twins.

"I'm Alex and this is my brother, Conner."

A large and happy smile came to Froggy's face.

"Are you by any chance Alex Bailey?" Froggy asked, grinning from ear equivalent to ear equivalent.

"Um… yes." Alex was shocked. How did this amphibian know who she was?

"As in 'This book belongs to Alex Bailey'?" Froggy asked. He leaned over the side of his chair and pulled up a stack of books, opening one to show where the phrase was written inside it.

"Those are my books!" Alex said excitedly, recognizing the books she had dropped into *The Land of Stories*. "I was wondering what had happened to them."

"It was so peculiar," Froggy explained. "I was out collecting flies and was walking down the path to the swamp when one just fell from the sky and landed on my head. I returned the next day and found several more in the same spot. It was the oddest thing that's ever happened to me!"

"You mean, besides being turned into a frog, right?" Conner asked. "Because if I were you, that would be on the top of my list—*ouch*!" Alex elbowed her brother.

Froggy ignored Conner and went on with his explanation.

"As you can see from my shelves, I love to collect books, especially when I'm not expecting to," he said. "And these books were unlike any I had ever read! They described people and places I had never seen or heard of, and I thought I had seen it all! The authors wrote about such interesting places. Could you imagine a world without witches or trolls or giants? What imaginations!"

Froggy chuckled at the thought of this. The twins laughed along with the best fake laughs they could muster.

"Please keep them. I have duplicate copies at home," Alex told him.

Froggy was delighted to hear this.

"Uh-huh." Conner cleared his throat. "Speaking of home, I don't mean to interrupt this little book club, but we're very lost and would like to know where we are."

Froggy's glossy eyes went back and forth between the twins, watching them closely.

"Oh, children, you wouldn't be here if you knew where you were," Froggy said. "You're in the Dwarf Forests."

He had expected to get some sort of worried reaction from the twins, but Alex and Conner just

stared up at him with very little expression.

"The Dwarf Forests?" Alex asked. "What are the Dwarf Forests?"

"You've never heard of them?" Froggy asked, completely appalled. The twins both shook their heads.

"It's a very dangerous place," Froggy told them. "It's the only designated area of land without a ruler or a government; it's a kingdom where everyone is their own king. It used to be populated by dwarfs who worked in the mines, but now it's full of criminals and fugitives mostly. It's a place where people go when they don't want to be found."

Knowing they had not only traveled into another world but were in a dangerous part of that world did nothing to help the twins' anxiety level.

"Are there other kingdoms?" Alex asked.

Froggy was stunned. It was as if she had asked him what color the sky was. However, he seemed to be enjoying their unfamiliarity.

"Of course," he said. "There's the Northern Kingdom, the Sleeping Kingdom, the Charming Kingdom, the Corner Kingdom, the Fairy Kingdom, the Red Riding Hood Kingdom, the Elf Empire, the Dwarf Forests, and the Troll and Goblin Territory. How can you possibly not know this?"

This was difficult for the twins to wrap their heads around. How big was the fairy-tale world?

Their puzzled faces inspired Froggy to hop out of his seat and cross to one of the bookshelves and return with a large, rolled-up scroll. He handed it to the twins, and they unrolled it.

It was a large, detailed map of the new world they were in. The fairy-tale world was a wide continent bordered by mountain ranges and covered in forests with castles and palaces and villages scattered all around.

The Northern Kingdom was the largest of the kingdoms and took up most of the top of the map. The second largest was the Charming Kingdom, spread across to the south, and the third largest was the Sleeping Kingdom, which stretched along the east. The Dwarf Forests covered the majority of the west.

The tiny Corner Kingdom was tucked away in the southwest corner of the continent, and in the northwest corner was the Elf Empire. In between the Charming Kingdom and the Sleeping Kingdom was the Fairy Kingdom, and just above that was the Troll and Goblin Territory.

The Fairy Kingdom looked beautiful, as it was very colorful and seemed to sparkle on the map. The Troll and Goblin Territory looked frightening and appeared to be surrounded by large boulders and rocks, preventing anything from going in or coming out.

In the very center of it all was the Red Riding Hood Kingdom, circled by an unmistakable brick wall of gigantic proportions.

Alex and Conner couldn't believe it. The world they had grown up hearing about was real. It was *all* real, and it was bigger and better than they ever could have imagined.

Alex couldn't help but get emotional. Tears began to flood her eyes.

"Together, all the kingdoms create the Happily Ever After Assembly," Froggy explained.

"The Happily Ever After Assembly?" Conner asked with a slight touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"It's the organization formed to uphold the treaty all the rulers signed so that all the kingdoms could live in peace and prosperity," Froggy told them.

"Sounds like our United Nations," Alex whispered to Conner.

"All the kingdoms have their own traditions and celebrated histories," Froggy went on.

"And there are kings and queens, I'm assuming?" Conner asked.

"Oh, yes," Froggy said. "The Northern Kingdom is ruled by Queen Snow White. The Corner Kingdom is watched over by Queen Rapunzel. The Sleeping Kingdom—formerly known as the Eastern Kingdom, but renamed after the dreadful curse under which it was placed—is governed by Queen Sleeping Beauty. And of course, the Charming Kingdom is ruled by King Charming and his wife, Queen Cinderella."

"Wait, are these the current monarchs?" Alex asked, with a spark of excitement in her eyes. "You mean Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty… they're all still alive?"

"Of course they are!" Froggy said.

"Oh my goodness, that's wonderful!" Alex said excitedly. "Isn't that wonderful, Conner?"

"Whatever," Conner mumbled.

"How old do you think they are?" Froggy asked. "Queen Snow White and King Charming have only been married a few years. Queen Cinderella and King Charming are expecting their first child soon. Queen Sleeping Beauty and King Charming are sadly still trying to restore their kingdom to consciousness after that horrible sleeping spell it was placed under."

"Wait," Conner said. "Are you saying all these queens are married to the same guy?"

"Certainly not," Froggy said. "There are three King Charmings. They're brothers."

"Of course!" Alex said. "Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty all married *Prince Charming*! There's more than one! How come I never thought about that?"

Conner's eyes were fixated on the map. He kept searching for some kind of road or bridge that would lead them back home, but he found nothing.

"Why are there a bunch of rocks around the Troll and Goblin Territory?" Conner asked.

"As punishment," Froggy said. "Trolls and goblins are nasty creatures and have a habit of kidnapping people and turning them into slaves. The Fairy Council forced the trolls and goblins into one territory, and none of them are allowed to leave without permission."

"Fairy Council?" Alex asked. This world was almost too good to be true.

"Yes, they're a group of the most powerful fairies of the kingdoms," Froggy explained. "Cinderella's Fairy Godmother is one of them, and so is Mother Goose, and all the fairies that blessed Sleeping Beauty when she was a baby are on it, too. They rule the Fairy Kingdom and are the leaders of the Happily Ever After Assembly."

"Is the Red Riding Hood Kingdom under some sort of punishment, too?" Conner asked. "Why is there a huge wall built around it?"

Alex looked down at the map and back up at Froggy, equally curious.

"That was a result of the C.R.A.W.L. Revolution," Froggy said.

"What was the crawl revolution?" Alex asked.

"The Citizen Riots Against Wolf Liberty," Froggy explained. "The Red Riding Hood Kingdom used to be a group of villages in the Northern Kingdom that were constantly under attack by wolves. They begged the Evil Queen—Snow White's stepmother, who was on the throne at the time—to help them. But the Evil Queen was too occupied with her vanity, so they revolted and started their own kingdom. They built a huge wall around it so no wolves could get in."

"And now Red Riding Hood is the queen?" Alex asked.

"Yes, she's the only elected queen in history," Froggy said. "The villagers figured her story was the most symbolic of their struggle, so they chose her to lead them."

"But isn't she just a little girl?" Alex asked.

"No, she's a young woman now. A very self-obsessed young woman, from what I hear. After all, she named the kingdom after herself! Her grandmother does most of the decision-making while she takes all the credit," Froggy said. "Unfortunately the C.R.A.W.L. Revolution only led to the rise of the Big Bad Wolf Pack."

"The Big Bad Wolf Pack?" Conner asked.

"Yes, they're the descendants of the original Big Bad Wolf. They travel around terrorizing villages and attacking unsuspecting travelers," Froggy said.

"Oh joy!" Conner said sarcastically. "I'm sorry I asked."

"But besides that, things are very peaceful throughout the kingdoms," Froggy said. His voice drifted off, and uncertainty grew on his face. "That was, until a week ago."

The twins leaned forward.

"What happened a week ago?" Alex asked.

"The Evil Queen escaped from the dungeons of Snow White's palace," Froggy told them. "I thought everyone had heard."

"It's news to us," Conner said.

"That can't be good," Alex said. "How'd she escape?"

"No one knows," Froggy said. "She just vanished, along with her Magic Mirror. Snow White's army has been searching throughout all of the kingdoms for her. They pass through these woods at least twice a day. So far they've found nothing, not even a footprint, to lead them in her direction."

"Do you think they're going to find her?" Conner asked.

"I hope so," Froggy said. "She's a very dangerous woman. She's the only queen in history to lose her throne; I couldn't imagine the revenge she must be seeking. Who knows what she's planning to do next?"

Alex suddenly became very tense. It had just occurred to her that, along with all the characters she had grown up loving, all the ones she hated and feared actually existed, too. It made her feel very uneasy and very unsafe.

The fire in the fireplace began to fade, and Froggy got up to add another log. The twins' eyes and mouths were wide open, and their heads were spinning from all of this new information.

"Exactly how far away do you live from here?" Froggy asked as he sat back down across from them.

The twins looked to each other, back at Froggy, and then back at each other. They didn't know what to tell him. Would he believe them if they told him the truth?

"It's practically a different world," Conner said. Alex shot him a dirty look and then nervously laughed, trying to make light of what her brother just said.

Froggy wasn't laughing. He sat straight up in his seat and his face grew very still with an intensity in his eyes, as if he had found the solution to a mystery.

"Interesting," Froggy said, eyeing the twins back and forth. "Because, if I didn't know better, just from the way you dress and the way you speak—and the way you were so surprised at basic history—I would say that there was a very good chance you are indeed from a different world."

They didn't understand what he was trying to say. Did he know something that they didn't?

"Just out of curiosity, have you ever heard of another world?" Alex asked him.

"Or, preferably, how to get back to it?" Conner added.

Froggy studied their faces even more intently for a moment. He got up again and went to a bookshelf on the far side of the room. He rustled through the books, looking for something of special interest. Finally, he found it: a small leather-bound journal with a red band around it.

"Have either of you ever heard of the Wishing Spell?" Froggy asked the twins.

Alex and Conner shook their heads. Froggy flipped through the pages of the journal.

"I assumed not," he said. "It's a legendary spell comprised of a list of items, and, apparently, when you put the items together, you are granted one wish. It doesn't matter how extravagant the wish is, the Wishing Spell will grant it. Many people believe that it's only a myth, and I did, too, until I found this journal."

"What does that journal have to do with anything?" Conner asked.

"It was written by a man from the Charming Kingdom," Froggy said. "He managed to discover what these items were, and he recorded his journey to find them. His one wish was to reunite with the woman he loved, and in the journal he claimed she lived in 'another world.' "

Alex and Conner sat straight up. They were sitting on the edges of their seats without realizing it.

"I thought the man writing the journal was crazy. I didn't believe another world could exist, until I began finding your books, Alex. And then when I saw you bickering in the forest, I knew you two were different," Froggy said. "I knew you had to be from the place that the man had written about."

The twins were happy the truth was out. Froggy seemed genuinely excited about the whole thing.

"Did he make it?" Alex asked. "Did the man cross over into the other world?"

"He must have," Froggy said. "The journal ends when he found the last item." Froggy handed the twins the journal and took a seat in his chair. "Wherever you're from, if it's home that you wish to go back to, I think your best chance is by following this journal."

The twins went silent for a moment. They stared down at the journal in his hands with immense hope.

"What items does the spell require?" Alex asked.

"All sorts, from all over," Froggy told her. "But the journal gives great instructions on where and how to find them. Some of them are very dangerous to get to."

"Of course they are," Conner said. "Typical."

"If the spell will grant whatever wish you want, why didn't you search for the items and wish to be human again?" Alex asked Froggy.

Froggy thought about this for a moment. It was a question he had asked himself many times, and he was ashamed of the answer.

"I've kept the journal all these years in case I ever decided to," Froggy explained with difficulty. "But searching for the items would mean I'd have to face the world looking like this and, frankly, children, that's something I'm not ready to do. It's something I don't think I'll ever be able to do."

He spoke from a place of deep sadness. Clearly he wasn't finished learning the witch's lesson yet.

"It's getting late," Froggy said. "Why don't you sleep on it and decide what you want to do in the morning. You're welcome to stay here as long as you'd like."

"Thank you," Alex said. "I hope we aren't a bother."

"No bother at all." Froggy smiled earnestly.

Froggy got them a large blanket to share. He blew out all the lamps and put out the fire in the fireplace.

Alex and Conner tossed and turned with thoughts of the Wishing Spell all night, but there was no

decision to make. If the journal offered a possible way home, they would have to do anything and everything it instructed them to. They had no choice.

They were about to embark on the greatest scavenger hunt of their lives.

CHAPTER SIX

THE DWARF FORESTS

I packed you some food, a couple of blankets, and a few gold coins I've been saving," Froggy told the twins, and handed Conner a sheepskin satchel.

"Thank you so much," Alex said. "It's so kind of you!"

"Now, when you say *food*, what exactly are you referring to?" Conner asked, holding the satchel a safe distance away from him.

"Some rolls and apples," Froggy told him.

"Oh, good," Conner said, relieved.

Froggy handed Alex the map and journal they had been looking at the previous night.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Froggy asked them. "You're both awfully young to be going on a quest like this."

Alex and Conner looked to each other, each thinking the same thing. It was hard enough to navigate around their own world at their age; could they really travel around a different world altogether without the help of an adult? But the twins found reassurance in each other's eyes; they knew that, through it all, they'd at least have each other.

"We really don't have any other choice," Alex said. "Thank you so much for all your help, Froggy. We would still be lost in the woods without you."

Froggy smiled widely and nodded.

"Of course," he said. "I should be thanking you. I rarely have an opportunity to feel so useful."

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Alex asked. "A map is great and all, but a tour guide would be better."

At first, Froggy's smile grew with excitement as he was tempted by the idea. The thought of traveling out into the world and leaving his hole-in-the-ground home was so alluring, it was clear he could feel the temptation throughout his entire body. However, his fears and insecurities about the outside world seeing him and what he had become erased the opportunity from his mind.

"I can't, children," Froggy said with a heavy heart. "But I wish you the best."

The twins were disappointed, but they understood. It was difficult for them even to go to school with just a small blemish on their faces; they couldn't imagine the stress of facing the world as an enormous amphibian.

"It's very important that you get out of the Dwarf Forests by sundown," Froggy instructed. "Go to the path and travel south into the Corner Kingdom. It's a few hours' walk, but you'll be safer there. Travel as quickly and quietly as you can. Promise me."

The twins promised. Alex gave Froggy a big hug and kissed his cheek. Conner shook his hand and then wiped it on his pants.

"I hope we see each other again," Alex told him.

"That would be lovely, but for your sakes, I hope we don't," Froggy said, and winked.

Conner clapped his hands. "All right, those items for the Wishing Spell aren't gonna find themselves," he said. "Let's go."

The twins pushed open the door and climbed up from inside the underground home. As they headed into the forest, Froggy waved good-bye until he was out of their sight. Soon, they were back

on the dirt path they had landed on the previous day, and they headed south as they had been instructed.

It was very unnerving for the twins to be alone on the path now that they understood the dangers of the forest. They regretted not trying harder to persuade Froggy into coming with them. They jumped at every tiny sound the trees made.

Alex and Conner remained silent for the first hour or so as they walked, afraid that their voices would attract unwanted attention from some of the creatures Froggy had warned them about.

"We're very brave," Alex finally said to her brother, breaking the silence.

"Or very stupid," Conner said.

The path curved through the forest, revealing new trees and bushes every few feet. After some time had passed, the twins could feel their nerves and tension calm. Their pace became slower and slower the more they walked, as they become more comfortable with being in the forest.

Conner let out a long sigh.

"What's that for?" Alex asked him.

"I was just thinking," Conner said. "Alice went to Wonderland after she fell into a rabbit hole. Dorothy's whole house was scooped up by a tornado that dropped her off in Oz. The Narnia kids traveled through an old wardrobe… and we ended up in the fairy-tale world by *falling through a book*."

"Where are you going with this, Conner?" Alex said.

"I'm just saying, it's kind of lame compared to the others," Conner said with another sigh. "I wonder if there's a support group for people like us? You know, people who accidentally travel into other dimensions and whatnot."

Alex was appalled.

"Do you not get how lucky we are?" she said. "Think about all the things we're going to see! Think about all the people we're going to meet! We're going to be experiencing things *no one* else in our world ever has!"

Conner rolled his eyes. "I'll feel lucky as soon as we get back home."

Alex reached into her bag and pulled out their map. Her eyes became fixated on it, and she only looked up every minute or so to make sure she wasn't about to walk into a tree. Every few seconds she'd snicker or smile when she discovered something new. She looked like a *tourist*.

"Shouldn't we be reading the journal?" Conner asked. "We need to make a list of the Wishing Spell items and find out where we can find them."

"We will," Alex said passively. "There'll be plenty of time for that."

Conner was getting frustrated with her. Did she not realize how serious the situation was?

"We need to go home," Conner said. "What are we waiting for?"

"There are just a couple things I would like to see before we go home," Alex told him.

"What are you talking about?" Conner said, his volume and temper rising.

"We're in the fairy-tale world, Conner. We should make the most of it while we're here!" Alex said. "Who else gets the chance to see Cinderella's palace or Jack's beanstalk or Rapunzel's tower in person?"

Conner's mouth and eyes were wide open. He couldn't believe what his sister was saying.

"We're stuck in another world, and you want to go *sightseeing*?" he said. "Are you hearing yourself right now? Do you know how crazy you sound?"

She stopped walking and turned to face her brother. There was seriousness and desperation in her eyes.

"Conner, the last year of our lives has been horrible. We've lost everything but Mom and each other," Alex said. "Every night, I've wished for a fairy godmother to magically appear and make everything better, and now we're in a place where that is a possibility! I don't have friends to go home to like you do. The only friends I've ever known live here, and I'm not going home until I meet them!"

Alex continued walking down the path. Conner was absolutely dumbstruck.

"Why am I being the logical one?" Conner questioned. "You're always over-thinking everything! How are you not out of your mind with worry?"

"What's there to be worried about?" Alex asked with a laugh.

"For starters, what's Mom gonna do when she finds out we're missing?" Conner pointed out. "She'll think we were kidnapped! And she has enough to worry about already!"

Alex knew he was right, but her desire to see the fairy-tale world was so strong that she was able to ignore him.

"All I need is a day or two," Alex said. "That'll give us plenty of time."

"How are you so sure these worlds run on the same time schedule?" Conner panicked. "Think about it, the stories of Cinderella and Red Riding Hood have been around for hundreds of years in our world, but it only seems like a decade or less has gone by here since! A couple days here and Mom may be in her eighties when we get home!"

Conner rubbed his head; it hurt from thinking so hard. Alex was listening more than she wanted to. He was practically repeating word for word what the logical voices in her head were saying.

"What if something happens while we're gone?" Conner asked. "What if we get back and apes or aliens have taken over our planet? If I miss *that*, I will never forgive you!"

Alex stopped walking and looked up from the map. A very odd expression appeared on her face.

"Didn't think of that, did you?" Conner asked her, but Alex wasn't listening to him. Something else entirely had caught her attention.

"Do you smell that?" Alex asked.

"What?" Conner said. "All I smell are trees and dirt."

Alex took a couple steps further. "No, it's something else. It's sweet, like something's baking."

Conner sniffed. Sure enough, a scrumptious smell was drifting through the air.

"It smells like… *gingerbread*!" Alex said. She looked at her brother with large, excited eyes.

"Oh no," Conner said.

Before he could stop her, Alex took off running into the trees, away from the path, toward the direction the aroma was coming from.

"Alex, wait!" Conner ordered. "Come back! You don't know where you're going!"

Alex bolted through the trees, jumping over boulders and bushes as she passed them. The scent became stronger and stronger the farther she strayed from the path. Conner was right behind her, urging her to turn around. Finally, Alex came to a halt, and Conner bumped into her. She had found exactly what she was hoping to see.

A small gingerbread house sat in between two large trees. White frosting covered its pointed roof, gumdrops were clumped around like shrubbery, and candy canes lined the path to the front door like a picket fence.

"Look, Conner!" Alex said, catching her breath. "It's a gingerbread house, a *real* gingerbread house! Look how cute it is!"

"Whoa," Conner said. "I feel like I may get diabetes from just looking at that place."

"Let's go inside!" Alex said, and stepped toward the house.

Conner grabbed her arm. "Have you lost your mind? Do the words *Hansel and Gretel cannibalism incident* mean anything to you?"

"I just want to peek inside for a second, only one second—"

The door of the gingerbread house slowly opened. Alex and Conner froze. A large, hooded figure squeezed out of the door and then raised its head to stare at the twins.

It was, undoubtedly, a witch, and although they had never seen a real witch to make a comparison to, she was more grotesque than they could have imagined. Her skin was wrinkled and pale with a yellowish tint. Her eyes were bloodshot and bulged out of her head. She was hunched over and had an enormous hump on her back.

"Hello, children," the witch said. Her voice was high-pitched and crackly. "Would you care to join me for a bite to eat?"

It was impossible for the twins to hide their fear; they both stood still staring at her as if she were a rabid Tyrannosaurus rex about to pounce on them at any moment.

"No, thank you," Alex said. "We're just passing by. *You have a lovely home.*"

They slowly backed up, one foot at a time.

"Wouldn't you like to see the inside?" the witch asked.

"The inside of whom?" Conner said, and Alex elbowed him.

"Don't be silly, kiddies, *come inside*," said the witch, losing her patience. She extended an inviting, shaking hand toward them. They noticed it was covered in burn marks, perhaps from the last time she'd had visitors.

"I thought the witch died at the end of 'Hansel and Gretel,' " Alex whispered to Conner.

"Maybe she got hold of a fire extinguisher after they left," Conner whispered back.

They continued backing slowly away from her.

"Thank you so much for the invitation, but we really need to get going," Alex said.

"We're on a really tight schedule," Conner added. "We're meeting a couple of dwarfs for coffee in a half hour, so we better get a move on!"

They quickly took off in the direction they'd come, but came to a jarring stop when the witch suddenly appeared in front of them with a *pop!* They tried running back the other way, but the witch just appeared in front of them again with a *snap!* They were trapped.

"You aren't going anywhere," the witch said. She seemed to grow taller, and her eyes bulged bigger as her patience ran out. "Now, be nice little chickies and follow me *inside*."

"Alex, this is like one of those bad videos about strangers from the first grade," Conner whispered to her. "Do you still have your kidnapping whistle?"

"You don't want to eat us!" Alex told the witch. "We've been walking for a while, so we're really dehydrated! We're practically just skin and bone."

The witch was definitely growing. Her hump shrank as her body rose higher.

"Your friend seems to be rather plump," the witch said, looking at Conner like a praying mantis about to strike. "He has more than enough to spare!" She was practically salivating.

"I beg your pardon?" Conner was so offended, he forgot how terrifying she was. "I'll have you

know I'm on the edge of another growth spurt, and I always get a little pudgy before one!"

"Conner, please don't—" Alex tried, but was too late.

"Why do you want your victims chubby, anyway? Wouldn't it be healthier if they were muscular and fit?" Conner said.

The witch looked to the side and raised an eyebrow. She had never considered this. Her consideration must have distracted her from attacking the twins, because she began to shrink back to her normal, humped shape.

"If you ask me," Conner continued, "you should turn your gingerbread house into a gingerbread gym and health club!"

Alex often couldn't believe the crazy things that her brother said, but this one took the cake.

"What a *delicious* idea," the witch cackled. "I'll rebuild as soon as I'm finished with *you*."

The witch began to grow again. This time her mouth opened wide and a set of jagged teeth grew out of it. She was going in for the attack.

Alex screamed, *"Wait!"* With her hands covering her face, she said, *"You owe him!"*

The witch recoiled into her smaller form. "I owe him?" she asked.

"Yes! Isn't that how it works?" Alex said. "He presented you with an idea, and now you owe him a *wish*!"

"A wish?" the witch asked.

"A wish?" Conner asked.

Alex nodded convincingly. The witch grunted.

"Yes, the Happily Ever After Assembly just enacted a new law," Alex said, thinking on the tips of her toes. "Any witch presented with a good idea must return the favor by granting a wish."

"Um… yeah," said Conner, going along with it. "Don't make Mother Goose fly down here. She'll let her geese loose on you, and some of them lay golden eggs, and that can't feel good. Who knows how aggressive they'll be?"

"Fine," the witch said. "I shall grant you *one* wish. But only because I don't want to deal with those fluttering freaks… *again*."

Conner leaned close to his sister. "What should I wish for? Should I wish to go home?" he whispered.

"No, she'll try to trick us with whatever we wish for! It has to be really specific!" Alex said.

"Hurry, child! I'm hungry!" the witch demanded.

"Okay…" said Conner, thinking as fast as he could. It had to be a good one; it had to help them get out of the situation. "I wish you would become a *vegetarian*!" he said to the witch.

Alex turned her head sharply toward her brother. "That's what you picked?"

"Very well," the witch shrieked. The twins weren't sure if she knew what a vegetarian was. She reached her hands toward the sky and clapped, making a sound as loud as thunder.

The twins ducked, but the wish appeared to have done the trick. The witch's hump faded away, the yellowish tint of her skin disappeared, and her bloodshot eyes calmed.

"I've lost my appetite," the witch said. She shrugged her shoulders, turned away from Alex and Conner, and walked into the gingerbread house, slamming the door behind her.

Alex and Conner took a deep breath. Their bodies had never been so tense.

"That was a close one!" Alex said.

"You're welcome!" Conner said.

"How did you think of wishing for her to become a vegetarian?" Alex asked.

Conner scratched his head. "It was the only sure way I knew she wouldn't eat us."

Alex smiled at him. She wasn't given too many moments to be proud of her brother, so when the chance came, she soaked it up for all it was worth.

"Nice job, but let's get out of here in case your wish wears off."

The twins hurried back through the forest until they returned to the path. They continued heading south, this time keeping to a faster pace. They had had their first dangerous encounter in the fairy-tale world, and they weren't in any hurry for the next.

Alex and Conner had been hurrying along the path for a while, when Conner said, "Alex, I've got to sit down! I feel like my legs are going to fall off!"

"Conner, we have to keep moving! It's already after noon, and Froggy said we need to cross into the Corner Kingdom before nightfall!" Alex warned.

"Easy for him to say—he has frog legs!" Conner said through heavy breathing. "Just for a couple of minutes, and then we'll keep going, I promise!"

"All right, but let's find someplace safe," Alex said.

They continued walking a little farther and found a pleasant opening between some trees. Conner found a fallen tree to sit on and catch his breath.

Alex looked around at the trees of the forest, noticing that they were all different shapes and sizes and shades of green. She was still bewildered by everything that had happened.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Alex said. "All of this has been at our fingertips the whole time, and we never knew."

She took a seat next to her brother, grinning from ear to ear.

"What do you think Dad and Grandma would make of all this?" Alex asked him. "What do you think they would say if they knew all of it was actually real?"

"From the way they always talked about fairy tales, you'd think they did," Conner said, and couldn't help but smile at the thought.

"I have a thousand reasons why I wish Dad was still alive," Alex said. "But now I wish it more than ever, just so we could bring him back and show all of this to him and Grandma."

"We have to get back first," Conner reminded her. "And while we're on the subject, I think we should take a look at that journal. The sooner we read it, the sooner we can get back home."

"I know," she told him. "But we should at least see a castle or palace first! Dad and Grandma would have wanted us to!"

Conner grunted. "Alex, we just barely escaped being lunch for a witch. We can't waste any more time—"

The sounds of a few twigs snapping came from across the clearing, as something approached. Alex and Conner ducked down behind the fallen tree, hidden from view.

A cream-colored horse slowly traveled into the clearing. It picked up its hooves in a peculiar manner, as if it had been trained to tiptoe. A woman was riding the horse, and she looked cautiously around the clearing as they entered it.

She was young and beautiful. Her eyes were big and blue, and her hair was half up and flowed into long, golden curls. She wore a long, maroon knit coat with black leggings and very tall boots.

The woman and her horse moved covertly into the center of the clearing.

"Easy, Porridge," said the woman, stroking the horse. "That's a good girl, nice and slow." She

hopped down from the horse and made her way to a tree. Alex could see that some sort of paper was pinned to it and, after taking a closer look, saw it was the Wanted poster for Goldilocks that she had seen the day before.

The woman shook her head after reading it. She ripped it off the tree and crumpled it up.

"Who is that? What is she doing?" Conner whispered to his sister.

"Do I look psychic to you?" Alex whispered back at him.

Suddenly, the woman's head jerked in their direction. Whoever she was, she had a remarkable sense of hearing. She drew a large sword from inside her coat and raised it high in the air.

Her gaze was stern and determined; she was obviously someone to be reckoned with. She stepped closer to where Alex and Conner were hiding.

A piercing wolf howl boomed through the forest. It was so loud that Alex and Conner covered their ears. The woman spun around and pointed her sword in the opposite direction of the twins.

"Porridge, get ready! We're about to have company," she said.

"Who?" Alex and Conner mouthed to each other.

Creeping through the trees toward them were half a dozen wolves. However, these wolves were unlike any the twins had ever seen before. They were four times the size of any normal wolf of their world. Their fur was jet-black and matted. Their eyes were red, and their snouts were wide. These wolves were ready to kill at any minute. Without a doubt, the twins had come face-to-face with the Big Bad Wolf Pack.

Alex and Conner held on to each other, shaking with fear. The woman in the maroon coat never showed a hint of panic; she pointed her sword at the largest of the wolves, standing in the middle of the pack. The wolves growled and gritted their teeth toward her.

"Hello, *Malumclaw*," the woman said.

"Hello, *Goldilocks*," Malumclaw growled.

The twins were both in silent hysterics.

"Goldilocks! That's Goldilocks!" Alex mouthed to Conner.

"The wolf talks! It talks!" he mouthed back to her.

"I'm surprised you're not chained down in some Red Riding Hood Kingdom jail cell yet," Malumclaw said to Goldilocks.

"I'm surprised you haven't been turned into a rug for a child's nursery yet," Goldilocks said. "What brings you to this part of the forest? There isn't an innocent village for your pack to torment for miles."

Goldilocks never lowered her sword. The other wolves in Malumclaw's pack slowly surrounded her and Porridge.

"My pack is hungry. We've stopped for an afternoon snack," the wolf said.

"Have you really come to eat me?" Goldilocks said. "I thought you'd have learned your lesson by now. I bite back." She gripped her sword even tighter.

Malumclaw laughed.

"The wolf can laugh! It can laugh!" Conner mouthed to Alex.

"You are far too small a portion," Malumclaw told her with an evil, wolfish grin. "Your horse, however, has plenty to go around!"

Alex and Conner had never seen a horse look as frightened as Porridge did. Had she not been so light-colored, they would have sworn she had gone pale.

"If you so much as scratch her, I will wear you as a coat, do you understand me?" Goldilocks warned him.

"All people do in this world is eat one another!" Conner whispered to Alex and, as soon as he did, he knew he shouldn't have.

A wolf turned in the twins' direction. "Malumclaw, I think I just heard something," it growled.

Alex covered her mouth so as not to scream.

The wolf began sniffing vigorously in the air. "I smell two children! One boy and one girl."

Goldilocks seemed as surprised as the rest of the wolves to learn this. So *that* was who she had heard behind her moments before.

The twins could hear their own heartbeats. What was going to happen next? Was Goldilocks going to rat them out to save her horse? Had they just narrowly escaped being devoured by a witch only to be eaten by a pack of overgrown wolves?

"I'm afraid you just missed them!" Goldilocks said. "I frightened them away just like I frightened you the last time our paths crossed."

"Then horse it is!" Malumclaw declared.

All the wolves howled together; it was deafening. They began circling Goldilocks and Porridge, getting closer and closer. The wolves snapped at them with their enormous jaws, and Goldilocks swung her sword at them.

One wolf tried to pounce on Porridge, but the horse kicked him away with her hind legs. Another wolf tried to bite Goldilocks, but she struck him with her sword, drawing blood, and he whimpered away.

Goldilocks was the best swords*woman* the twins had ever seen. Anytime one of the wolves got so much as a claw close to her or her horse, she was quick to shield them. Porridge wasn't so bad herself; she wasn't shy about kicking away any wolf that was too close for comfort.

A wolf leaped and sank his claws into Porridge's back. The horse bucked to free herself. In one quick slice, Goldilocks chopped one of the wolf 's paws off. He limped into the forest, howling in pain.

Two wolves teamed up on Goldilocks. One leaped toward her, and she tripped over the other one. Her sword flew into the air and landed close to where the twins were hiding. Goldilocks was on the ground, unarmed.

The wolves were closing in on her and the horse, going in for the kill.

"Catch!" Conner yelled, and tossed the sword straight to her. Goldilocks swung it hard at the wolves closing in on her, leaving large gashes in their muzzles.

"Retreat!" Malumclaw ordered his pack. "No snack is worth all of this trouble!"

The wolves stampeded into the forest, growling and howling in anger, letting the rest of the forest know they were on their way.

"Until we meet again, Goldilocks!" Malumclaw called out, as he disappeared into the trees with the rest of the wolves.

Goldilocks got to her feet and put her sword away. She was out of breath and, now that the enemy had left, much more vulnerable than she had shown in combat. She petted Porridge's nose and dabbed the horse's wounds with the fabric of her coat.

"Good girl, Porridge," Goldilocks said.

She turned and faced the fallen tree Alex and Conner were hiding behind.

"You can come out now," Goldilocks said.

The twins were hesitant at first. Then Conner popped up and exclaimed, *"That was awesome!"*

"Conner!" Alex said, popping up beside him.

"That was one heck of a fight!" Conner continued. "You know, at first I really thought they had you! I never expected a girl and her horse could be any match for six hungry wolves, but you impressed me! Where did you learn to fight like that?"

Goldilocks was not amused by his enthusiasm. "When you've been on the run as long as I have, you pick up a few tricks here and there." She turned around and remounted her horse with a jump.

"So, is it really you?" Alex asked. "Are you really Goldilocks? The woman wanted dead or alive for all her crimes?"

"Don't believe everything you read," she said sternly, and then pulled on Porridge's reins and galloped away. But she only traveled a few feet before she steered Porridge back to the twins.

"Thank you for your assistance," Goldilocks said.

Conner nodded.

"Here, take this. In case you need it." Goldilocks reached into the side of her boot and pulled out a silver dagger. She tossed it on the ground.

"Now get as far away from here as possible; those wolves will be back sooner than you expect." And with that said, Goldilocks and Porridge galloped off into the forest.

Alex and Conner stood motionless watching her ride off out of sight.

"That was amazing!" Conner said. He retrieved the dagger from the ground and put it inside their satchel. "As terrifying as that was, it was kind of nice to see another human for a change."

"We'd better get out of here," Alex said. "And this time we aren't stopping until we know we're out of the Dwarf Forests!"

Conner couldn't agree more. The twins continued down the dirt path, running this time.

They had experienced more danger today than they had ever experienced in their entire lives. Unfortunately for them, it wouldn't be their last encounter with Goldilocks, the Big Bad Wolf Pack, or the Dwarf Forests….

CHAPTER SEVEN

RAPUNZEL'S TOWER

The twins had been running for almost an hour straight, and they were starting to feel it. Their adrenaline was slowly running out, and the pains in their sides were increasing with every step they took. But since something dangerous seemed to happen every time they stopped moving, they were motivated to keep going.

"After all this running, P.E. testing should be a breeze," Conner said through heavy wheezes.

"We're almost there," Alex said unconvincingly. "Just a little farther!"

The forest had changed as they ran through it. The trees weren't so thick, and there was more space and grass between them. More sunlight fell through the branches, so nothing was in the dark. The path became wider, too, and much more visible.

The twins didn't feel as threatened by their surroundings; the forest almost grew *friendlier* the closer they traveled to the Corner Kingdom.

Conner collapsed to the ground. He was breathing harder than a fish out of water.

"I can't run anymore! I can't take another step!" he said with his limbs spread out as if he were making a snow angel in the dirt.

"We can't stop moving until we get into the Corner Kingdom," Alex reminded him through her own heavy breathing.

"I think we're there," Conner said.

"How do you know?" Alex asked.

"That's how," Conner said, and pointed upward.

In the distance, a tall tower was visible above the treetops. It was circular and made of square stones. There was a single window near the top, just below the pointed roof made of hay. It was partially covered in thick vines of ivy.

Alex gasped and clutched her hands together.

"It's Rapunzel's tower!" Alex said, and her eyes became a little misty at the sight of it.

"Are you seriously crying?" said Conner, who was still on the ground.

"It's just how I imagined it!" Alex said. "Get up! We're getting a closer look!"

Alex yanked on her brother's arm until he climbed to his feet, and the twins walked through the trees until they came to the base of the tower.

It was even taller than it looked, a few hundred feet tall at least. The twins' necks began to ache after looking up at the tower for a while. A large golden plaque was displayed in the ground in front of it that said:

QUEEN RAPUNZEL'S TOWER

"It must have been so hard for her," Alex said. "Seeing people and places so far away and never being able to visit them."

"At least she never had to worry about burglars," Conner said.

"I've got to go up there," Alex said.

"Do you have a jet pack or a grappling hook that I'm unaware of?" Conner asked her.

"No, I'll have to climb it," Alex said, surprising herself with the declaration.

"You have officially lost your mind!" Conner said. "We've almost been killed twice, and we haven't even been here a full day yet! *We need to stop fooling around and find a way home, Alex!* What part of that don't you understand?"

"Look," Alex said. "I'm going to climb up there for just a few minutes, and then as soon as I climb back down, we'll read the journal and find out what all the Wishing Spell items are, okay?"

"Alex…" Conner began. His face was turning pink.

"Please, Conner," Alex said. "I need to do this, or I'll regret it forever!"

Conner shook his head with the frustration that only a sibling could cause. He wanted to lecture her about how childish she was acting. But the way she was looking at him, with her big, wanting eyes, prevented him. It was so rare that Alex ever *needed* something, he supposed one last stop couldn't hurt.

"Don't kill yourself," Conner said. "But while you're up there, I'm going to start reading the journal and make a list of the Wishing Spell items we need to find."

Alex happily nodded and put her bag on the ground. She stretched for the climb she was about to make.

Conner sat on the ground and began flipping through the pages of the journal.

Climbing the tower was easier said than done. After searching around the base of the tower for a place to put her first step, Alex could tell why a long train of golden hair might be needed to get to the top of it. Eventually, she found a stone block with a chip large enough to put her foot in and take her first step.

"Here I go," Alex said. "Gosh, I wish I had a camera!"

"Trust me," Conner said. "The *real* Alex I know isn't going to want proof of this."

It was like climbing the world's most difficult rock-climbing wall. She relied on cracks and chips and uneven bricks sticking out just enough to put her hands and feet on. She moved slowly but carefully. If she were any larger, it wouldn't have worked.

"You're still at the bottom?" Conner said, looking up from the journal after a few minutes.

"Shut up, Conner!" Alex yelled back at him.

"I'm just saying, at the rate you're going Mom's gonna be eighty by the time we get home whether there's a time difference or not," he said.

After some time had gone by and she had gotten the hang of it, Alex moved more quickly, carefully pulling herself up using the ivy. The higher she climbed, the less she looked down at the ground, fearing it would tamper with her effort to reach the top.

She was so determined to see the top of the tower, to be in the room where Rapunzel had lived and to see what Rapunzel had seen through her window every day. She wanted to be where somebody else had been during the loneliest times of *their* life.

Rapunzel's story had always been easy for Alex to identify with. Alex felt she was in a tower of her own, looking at the world from an unreachable location.

She was almost halfway up the tower by now, and she was above all the trees in the forest. Any tiny misstep would no longer result in potential injury, it would mean death.

"There's a reason the witch put Rapunzel up there, you know!" Conner called up to her. "So no one could reach her!"

"I'm not listening to you!" Alex said, and then, stupidly, looked down.

Beads of sweat appeared on Alex's forehead. She felt like her heart had fallen out of her body. What was she doing? There was no way she could climb back down. Was she really risking her life just to see the inside of a tower? If she ever reached the top, would she be able get back down? Would she have to wait until her hair grew long enough to climb before she saw anyone again?

What would Conner do if she got stuck up there? Would he try to find the fairy-tale world equivalent of a fire department with a ladder long enough to get her down? Or would he find the Wishing Spell items on his own and go home without her?

The more Alex worried, the more she climbed. She knew it wouldn't be productive to worry and stay still, so she just kept going. It felt like hours had gone by.

She looked up. *She was only a few feet away from the window!* Just a few more feet and she'd be there! Finally, she felt the windowsill with her hands and slowly pulled herself up to it… then through it… she was almost through the window…

Alex swung her legs over the window and into the tower.

"Thank God," she said to herself. She might be stuck in the tower, but at least she was safe.

Alex looked around the tower; it wasn't at all what she had expected. It was a large, circular room with no furniture or decoration of any kind. In fact, it was completely empty except for some hay and bird droppings littered around the floor.

"Hi, Alex!" said a voice inside the tower.

Alex jumped and screamed. She was completely shocked to see Conner sitting up against the tower wall just a few feet away from her.

"It took you long enough to get up here!" he said with a laugh. He was eating an apple, and he had the journal open in his lap.

"How in the world did you get up here?" Alex demanded. She was still out of breath from her climb.

"I took the stairs," Conner said with a mocking grin. "I was reading the journal. It says that after Rapunzel became queen, she installed a staircase in her tower so she could come back and visit whenever she wanted. The door to the staircase was on the other side of the tower. We just didn't see it."

"Oh," Alex said sheepishly. "That would make sense."

"Apparently, since Rapunzel was the only known ward of the witch, when the witch died, Rapunzel inherited all the land from her. That's how she became a queen," Conner informed her. "But you would have known that if you had read the journal. It's full of fun facts and helpful hints on how to get inside difficult places."

"I suppose," Alex said, and straightened her headband. She wasn't going to let this ruin the accomplishment she had felt after climbing the tower. She turned to look out Rapunzel's window.

The tower was surrounded by a sea of trees. Far off into the distance, Alex could barely see the rooftops of a tiny village; beyond the village was a large mountain range that rolled across the horizon. Now *this* was exactly what Alex had expected.

"It's quite a view, isn't it?" Conner asked.

"Yes," Alex said, almost in a whisper. "It's breathtaking. I just wish we could see it all, everything in the Land of Stories. But I did a lot of thinking on my way up here, and I know we have to get home. That's what we need to focus on."

"About that," Conner said. "You really need to read this, Alex. I've only skipped through a little bit of it—most of it's hard to read, because it's written by hand—but the situation is much more serious than we thought."

He handed her the journal. Alex sat next to him and opened it to the very first page and began reading.

Dear friends,

I don't know how, why, or where you found this journal, but since it has found its way into your possession, I hope that it will be of use to you.

What I am about to tell you is going to sound ludicrous, but I ask that you allow me to explain. Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I would have never believed it myself.

I am but a simple man from a simple village in the Charming Kingdom, but I have been to another world. It's a world with people and technologies that our world has only dreamed of and places we can only imagine. I know it seems absurd, but I promise you that an extraordinary place exists out there. We just can't see it.

During my visit, among the many things I experienced, I fell in love. I fell into a love so deep it was unlike anything I've ever known.

I never thought this kind of love was real. It's as if I am no longer living for myself anymore, but for her. So, I must find a way back. I must find a way to see her again.

The first time I traveled into the other world was simple. A fairy that knew of its existence allowed me to travel with her. She warned me not to get attached to anything or anyone, but while my brain was obedient to her request, my heart betrayed it.

The fairy has hence banned me from traveling with her. So, this time, I must find my way into the other world on my own.

Naturally, I didn't know where to start. How does one go about traveling into another world? Who was I even to ask? How would I even be able to ask without appearing like a lunatic? Cinderellian society is very judgmental, and I surely would have been ridiculed if my mission were discovered.

I came to the conclusion that I'd have to ask someone who was crazy in their own right, so no one would believe them if they spoke of what I had inquired. I needed someone I could trust, but who would never be trusted by the world.

I figured such a person didn't exist, and I lost hope, until I remembered the Traveling Tradesman. He was infamous for finding naïve children in the woods and trading their items of value for items he claimed to be magical. He was rumored to have given Jack the beans that grew his beanstalk.

Surely if anyone had heard of another world, it would be him. He was on the move at all times, since warrants for his arrest had been issued in all the kingdoms. He would be nearly impossible to find, but then again, my entire quest was virtually impossible.

Late one night, I traveled to a tavern up the stream from my home. There I befriended two farmers, and I proceeded to buy them round after round of drinks. After we had had a few laughs about childhood adventures and adolescent mistakes, I asked them if they had ever heard of the Traveling Tradesmen.

They both grew very quiet and were almost offended by the question. I assured them it was purely out of curiosity, and I wasn't accusing them of anything. I purchased another round of drinks, and after they were consumed the farmers confessed they had done business with him in earlier years.

"I traded two goats for a watering can that was supposed to magically water all my crops by itself," one of the farmers said. "The damn thing never worked, and it had a leak! It was the biggest mistake of my life."

"I traded two cows for a goose he told me would lay golden eggs!" the other claimed. "The goose was male! He gave me a gander!"

They tried convincing me to call off my search for him, but after one final round of drinks, they told me of the routes he covertly took through the woods.

I must have searched every patch of trees in the Charming Kingdom. Finally, in the woods just south of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom border, I found him.

The Traveling Tradesman was an odd, elderly, disheveled man. He wore several layers of raggedy clothing, and he had a long, gray beard. There were dark circles under his eyes, and one of the eyes wandered to the left, so it was difficult to tell what or whom he was looking at.

He traveled with a large cart that was pulled by a single mule. He was making a deal with a small boy holding a chicken when I first saw him.

"Wear this bear claw and you'll grow up to be the strongest boy in the village," the Tradesman told the boy, and then placed a necklace with a large bear claw around his neck and took the chicken from him.

The boy smiled and ran off. The Tradesman placed the chicken in the back of his cart. He must have made other trades that day, because he had already collected two geese and a pig.

"Are you a friend or a foe?" the Tradesman asked me.

"A friend, I believe," I said.

"Oh, good," he said with a jolly clap. "Then what may I do for you, friend? Would you like a bag of magic pebbles that grow into boulders? It'll only cost you a duck! Or perhaps you'd like to trade a swine for a loaf of bread that'll make you never be hungry again?"

"No, thank you," I said cautiously. "I've come to ask you for advice."

"Advice?" the Tradesman said. The eyebrow above his wandering eye rose. "That, my friend, is something no one has ever asked me for. What do you wish to know?"

"I am wondering…" I started, but wasn't sure how to put it into words. "What is the farthest distance you've traveled?"

The Tradesman scratched his beard and thought about it.

"Well, I'd honestly say there isn't a place in this world I haven't been," he told me. "I've traveled from the Southwest to the Northeast and from the Southeast to the Northwest. I've been from the bottom of the Corner Kingdom to the top of the Sleeping Kingdom and from the tip of the Elf Empire to the coast of the Fairy Kingdom—"

"What about farther than that?" I interrupted him, fearing he might continue listing every journey he had ever taken.

"Farther than that?" Both of the Tradesman's eyebrows were raised now. "What's farther than that? Only ocean is beyond that, and that's it."

"What about a different world? Have you ever heard of one or how to travel to one?" I finally

asked.

The Tradesman got a funny look in his eyes—or should I say eye.

"Young man, I've been all over the world, and I have never seen any suggestion of there being another," he said.

This topic upset him somehow, and he hopped aboard his cart and took the reins of his mule.

"Wait! Please don't go!" I pleaded.

"You youngsters always take pleasure in harassing an old man. Well, I won't allow it," he said.

He began to travel up the path. I was so desperate, I stood in front of his mule and was nearly trampled.

"I mean you no harm, old man!" I assured him. "You don't understand! I've been to another world, another place and time, and have seen extraordinary things! I need to go back! It may be the greatest wish I will ever have."

My arms were spread out, and I fell to my knees. I felt like an imbecile, confessing a preposterous need to a preposterous man.

The Tradesman sat still with his good eye fixed on me.

"Is it truly the most desired wish in your heart?" he asked.

"Yes!" I pleaded. "I've never wanted anything more in my life."

"If it's a wish you desire, then there's only one thing you need," he said.

"What is that?" I asked him.

"The Wishing Spell," the Tradesman said.

At first I thought he was joking.

"The Wishing Spell?" I asked him. "You mean the childish legend?"

"It's as real as the nose on my face," the Tradesman said. "Many men have spent their lives trying to obtain it. Legend has it that if you collect a series of objects and place them in close proximity, the collector's one true wish will be granted."

I didn't know whether or not to believe him. Perhaps he was harassing me now. My brain was critical, but my heart chose to learn more.

"And how do I find these items?" I asked.

"I don't have the slightest idea," he said.

Now I was frustrated with him. All of that explanation for nothing! I turned my back on him and began heading back home.

"But I know someone who does!" the Tradesman called after me.

"Who?" I demanded.

"I never trade for free," the Tradesman said, and extended an open palm toward me.

I placed a few gold coins in his hand. He kept his hand extended, and I placed a few more coins into it until he was satisfied.

"Her name is Hagatha," the Tradesman said.

"Where can I find her?"

"Take this path west into the Dwarf Forests, past the three boulders, and then follow the smoke," the Tradesman said, and that was all the direction he gave. He took the reins of his mule and traveled away from me.

Had I been thinking clearly, I would have chased after him and asked for more instructions, but instead I took off running toward the Dwarf Forests.

I had never been inside the Dwarf Forests before. I had been told of their dangers since I was a child, and once I was there I knew why I had been warned. The trees grew so thick and close that someone could be standing three feet away from you and you would never know they were there.

It took two days to find the three boulders the Tradesman had spoken of.

They were three large rocks that stuck straight out of the ground and were tilted in a peculiar position. I thought perhaps they might have been pointing at something, so I lowered my head to look in the direction they pointed.

The boulders pointed directly between two trees separated just enough that you could see a wide patch of the sky, and in this patch I could see smoke!

I ran toward the source of the smoke. Wherever it was coming from was completely off the path, and I almost seriously injured myself jumping over bushes and tree roots as I went.

Occasionally, I could see the sky through the tree branches and could tell if I was off track. I must have traveled in circles for hours. Every time I thought I was just about to find the place from which the smoke came, the wind would shift it in another direction.

I was lost. Every way I turned looked exactly the same. I felt as if the forest had swallowed me.

The sun was setting, and the smoke became harder to see. I started to panic; there was no shelter in sight. I thought for sure a treacherous beast would find me during the night and make a feast out of me.

I started running again. I could barely see where I was going at this point. I could hear howling in the distance. I tripped and fell straight through a large thornbush.

I landed hard in the grass on other side of the thornbush. I was scraped, scratched, and bleeding.

I got to my feet and looked around; I was standing in a large, circular clearing in the forest surrounded by a large wall of thornbush. In the center of this clearing was a small hut with a hay roof and a brick chimney. And rising out of this chimney was the smoke I had been following.

No wonder it had been so hard to find! I must have been wandering in circles around it, not knowing it was hidden behind the thornbush.

I approached the hut slowly. It had one door and two windows, and that was all. I went to knock on the door, but it burst open before I had a chance.

"Who are you?" said the woman who emerged from the hut.

I knew from the second I saw her that it was Hagatha. She looked like a human tree stump. She was short and wore a brown hooded cloak. Deep wrinkles circled her face, and one of her eyes was squinted. Her nose was one of the smallest I had ever seen and was neighbored by a gigantic mole.

"Are you Hagatha?" I asked her.

"How did you find me?" she snapped.

"I tripped through the thornbush," I said.

"But how did you know I was here?" she asked. Her squinted eye squinted even more.

"The Traveling Tradesman," I told her. "He said you knew of the Wishing Spell."

Hagatha grunted and sighed at the same time. Her lips wrinkled and looked me up and down. Reluctantly, she gestured me to follow her inside.

"Come in, come in!" Hagatha said.

The inside of the hut was an utter mess. There were vials of strange liquids everywhere; some bubbled, some glistened, some steamed. There were dozens of glass jars containing the strangest

things: dead and alive reptiles, insects of every species, even a glass jar of various eyeballs. Even though they had been plucked out from their owner's lids, I swear one of them blinked at me.

I was surprised to see how many animals were inside the hut as well; everything from geese and chickens to hummingbirds and monkeys all resided in cages. They were all restless, prisoners no doubt.

"Have a seat," Hagatha instructed. She pointed to a chair at the end of a table so large that it almost took up the entire hut.

"I see you are a collector of sorts," I said.

She didn't welcome the conversation. She ignored me and collected a few items around the room, a bowl here, a vial there.

"The thornbush surrounding your home is very clever," I said. "It must keep out most unwanted visitors."

"Most," she said, and glared at me. "That thornbush is from the Sleeping Kingdom. I planted it here and it grew around my home in a perfect circle, just as it grew around the castle while the queen was in her one-hundred-year slumber. You are the first to break through it."

"I do apologize—"

"This will cost you fifteen gold coins," Hagatha said, and took a seat across from me.

"For what?" I asked.

"You want to know what the Wishing Spell items are, don't you?" she asked. "That is why you're here, is it not?"

I reached into my pocket and laid all the coins I had left on the table. Unfortunately, doing business with the Tradesman had left me short.

"I only have fourteen coins," I told her.

Hagatha did not look pleased. "You stupid youth and your wishes. Very well," she said, and scooped up all the coins with one swipe.

She placed a bowl in front of her and emptied the contents of two vials into it: one red liquid, the other blue.

"One eye of an eagle, the wings of a pixie, and the heart of a newt," Hagatha said, and added these items into the bowl. "Plus three drops of giant blood, the big toe of an ogre, and a straw of gold hay. That completes the potion."

With all the ingredients added, the liquid in the bowl started to smoke and glow. Hagatha leaned over it and breathed it in. She closed her eyes and lost herself in a moment of deep thought.

"Does this potion tell you what the Wishing Spell items are?" I asked her.

"No, but it helps me remember," Hagatha said. "You aren't the first, and you won't be the last person to request the list. Consider yourself warned: Many people have lost their lives trying to acquire these items. They are impossible to collect."

"I'd rather die trying than live the rest of life wondering if I could have done it," I said.

"Then listen carefully to what I'm about to say, because I'll only say it once," Hagatha said.

I leaned as close to her as I possibly could. The anticipation made every second feel like an hour. This is what I had come all this way for….

"There are eight," Hagatha said. She took a deep breath and then listed the items:

"Glass that housed a lonely soul up 'til midnight's final toll.
A saber from the deepest sea, meant for a groom's mortality.
The bark of a basket held in fright while running from a bark with bite.
A stony crown that's made to share, found deep within a savage lair.
A needle that pierced the lovely skin of a princess with beauty found within.
A wavy lock of golden rope that once was freedom's only hope.
Glittering jewels whose value increased after preserving the false deceased.
Teardrops of a maiden fairy feeling neither magical nor merry.

I repeated the list to myself the entire way home and wrote the Wishing Spell list and my journey thus far into this journal. I don't know how I'm going to gather these items, but my goal is to find them and then record how I managed it, in case I ever need to do it again.

If you're reading this, I hope it means I succeeded, and if you're reading this and are about to start a journey of your own, I wish you luck.

"Wow," Alex said, looking up from the journal.

"You can say that again," Conner said. "You read that much faster than I did."

"Did you read any farther?" Alex asked. "Did he find all the items? Did he make it back?"

"I don't know. There are a lot of pages missing," Conner said.

Alex scanned through the list of the Wishing Spell items. She hadn't expected them to be hidden within riddles.

"Most of these are pretty easy to figure out," she said. "Like 'A needle that pierced the lovely skin of a princess with beauty found within.' That's obviously the spindle on Sleeping Beauty's spinning wheel."

"And 'A wavy lock of golden rope that once was freedom's only hope,' " Conner said. "That's totally a lock of Rapunzel's hair!"

Conner looked around the space where he was sitting. From between two floorboards he pulled out a lock of long, golden hair.

"Found one!" Conner said. "One of the first things I noticed when I got up here was how much that Rapunzel girl shed! Now we're one-eighth of the way home!"

Alex carefully wrapped the lock of golden hair in a tissue from her school bag.

"What do you suppose 'Glass that housed a lonely soul up 'til midnight's final toll' means?" she asked. "Whose soul was covered in glass?"

"I know!" Conner said. "Cinderella's glass slipper! That covered the sole of her foot!"

"Of course!" Alex said. "This list was spoken. Maybe Hagatha meant *sole*, like on a foot, but the man heard it as *soul*, like a person's spirit! Conner, you're a genius!"

"There's an alternative spelling?" Conner asked, but Alex went on.

"I wonder what 'The bark of a basket held in fright while running from a bark with bite' means," said Alex, thinking hard. "Basket, basket, basket… bite, bite, bite… *Little Red Riding Hood*! Her basket must have been made out of tree bark! And the bark with bite is talking about the Big Bad Wolf!"

"Okay," Conner said. "That would make sense."

Alex stood up and started pacing around the tower.

" 'Glittering jewels whose value increased after preserving the false deceased.' That's a tough one," she said. "Who was *falsely deceased*?"

"Didn't people think Snow White was dead after she bit into the poisoned apple?" Conner asked.

"Yes, that's right!" said Alex, jumping up and down. "She had a coffin made of glass and jewels from the dwarf mines! That must be what it means!"

"I'm so glad Dad and Grandma read to us so much growing up!" Conner said. "Who ever would have thought it would be this useful?"

" 'Teardrops of a maiden fairy feeling neither magical nor merry.' I guess we'll just have to find a fairy who has recently broken up with her boyfriend or something," Alex surmised.

"You don't think we could just kick her and make her cry?" Conner asked. "That just seems easier to me."

Alex ignored him and vigorously flipped through the journal again.

"Glass slipper? Check! Spindle? Check! Coffin? Check!" Alex said. "According to the notes scribbled in the margins, the author of the journal seems to agree with our guesses. I still don't know what some of these things are, though, like 'A saber from the deepest sea, meant for a groom's mortality' or 'A stony crown that's made to share, found deep within a savage lair.' "

"Like I said, there are a lot of pages missing," Conner said.

Alex was disheartened by this. The items they knew of seemed virtually impossible to collect, let alone the items they didn't know of. She walked over to the window and looked out at the view. The sun was just about to set, and, one by one, the fireplaces in the village nearby were lit and sent trails of smoke into the darkening sky.

"What if we get some of these riddles wrong?" she asked. "What if we guess the wrong thing? What if the author guessed wrong? What if he never made it back? What if he died trying?"

"We'll just have to do our best," Conner said, joining Alex at the window. "Some annoying little girl told me once that optimism always pays off, and she's usually right about things."

Alex smirked warmly at her brother.

"Okay, then," she said. "So far, we have a lock of Rapunzel's hair. We still need to collect Cinderella's slipper, Sleeping Beauty's spindle, jewels from Snow White's coffin, bark from Red Riding Hood's basket, tears from a fairy, plus two other items we have no idea about."

Conner gulped at hearing the list. They both looked out over the horizon and at the sea of trees that surrounded the tower. Somewhere out there, all of these things were waiting to be found.

"It looks like we're going to see more of the Land of Stories than we thought," Conner said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A HIDDEN PLACE

The northern tip of the Sleeping Kingdom was an ugly and vacant place. It was known for its bare trees, bumpy paths, and dangerously high cliffs. Small stones were scattered on the earth, making it nearly impossible to travel to by carriage. Even though it rained every so often, nothing ever grew, making it impossible for any animals to live there.

In the middle of this dry and deserted place was a small castle surrounded by a deep and empty moat. It was ancient and made of dark bricks, wooden doors, and had been through years of decay. No one knew who had built the castle or why it had been built but, then again, very few people even knew of its existence.

The inside of the castle was covered in a thick layer of dust. Cobwebs almost as old as the castle were on every windowsill, even though there were no spiders to be found. All the rooms and corridors were empty except for the occasional decrepit chair or table placed in a corner.

A great hall completed the eastern wing of the castle. Floor-length windows bordered the hall, letting in a lot of light, but they were so old that the glass distorted the outside world.

The castle couldn't have been a less desirable place to be. But, for one woman, it was the perfect place to hide.

Somehow, the Evil Queen had escaped the dungeons of Snow White's palace. She managed to get ahold of her Magic Mirror and traveled to a place where she knew she would never be found. The castle acted as the perfect sanctuary where she could finish the work she had started so long ago.

The Evil Queen was not a stranger to this place. Over the last century or so, many people had come to the castle, but only she and a few others were fortunate enough to have left it, including someone the former queen had not seen in a great while.

She had recently sent word to this old friend, asking him to come and aid her. And so she waited for him to arrive, knowing that he would any day now, for he owed her his life.

The Evil Queen stood facing her Magic Mirror with open palms and closed eyes. She was quite calm for being the most wanted woman alive. To her right, resting on a short stool, was the heart of stone she had always kept close.

Although it was one of the most infamous objects in all of the kingdoms, very few people had ever seen the Evil Queen's Magic Mirror. Many believed it was made of glamorous materials, like gold and diamonds and glass so pure one would swear they could walk through it.

In reality, the mirror was tall and wide with a black frame that peaked at the top. Tangled vines made of cast iron wove through the frame. The reflection was cloudy, as if it were a glass doorway into a very cold and foggy place. Although there was very little moisture in the air, perspiration dripped down the glass.

The Evil Queen opened her eyes and gazed deep into the mirror.

"Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, how long 'til the Huntsman answers my call?" she asked it.

The ghostly silhouette of a man appeared in the reflection. It spoke slowly and softly with a low and hoarse voice.

"While my queen awaits an old friend, once dear,
The Huntsman travels very near."

The man in the mirror slowly faded away. Within moments, three loud knocks came from the other side of the great hall doors.

"You may enter," the Evil Queen said.

The doors opened, creaking terribly, and a man entered the hall. He was tall, broad, and just on the verge of old age. He wore a variety of animal skins and had a limp in his right leg. His beard was light brown and graying. A crossbow was attached to his back, and a large hunting knife hung from his waist.

"My Huntsman has returned," the Evil Queen said.

The Huntsman walked across the hall to where the Evil Queen was standing.

"It's been a long time since I last saw your face," she said, "and I still find it hard to stomach looking at you."

The Huntsman fell to his knees and wept at her feet.

"Your Majesty," the Huntsman cried. "Please forgive me, for I have never forgiven myself after failing you!"

The Evil Queen looked down at him coldly. She had no sympathy left inside her for anyone.

"After all you had done for me and after all the mercy you had shown me, I could not kill the princess in the forest," the Huntsman said. "And just look at all the pain it has caused you. Had I just done as you asked, you would still be queen."

The Evil Queen let his pathetic sobs continue for a while longer. She showed no sign of forgiveness. He deserved to feel this way.

She stepped away from the Huntsman and peered through a window at the lifeless land that surrounded them.

"You and I were both prisoners in this castle once," the Evil Queen said. "I never imagined that one day it would act as my only refuge."

"You saved me," the Huntsman said. "I surely would have died here, had it not been for you. That is why I swore to you then that I would do anything to assist you with your mission. But I failed you __"

"And after all this time, I am still on the same mission as I was back then. So, do not cry, old friend. I have called you here for a chance at redemption."

She walked back to him and gently placed a hand on his cheek. The Huntsman stopped crying and looked up at the queen with huge, sad eyes.

"Redemption?" the Huntsman asked. "You mean, Your Majesty, you're still giving me a chance to serve you after what I've done?" The Huntsman's tears quadrupled in size, and he continued sobbing. "Curse this world for claiming you to be anything less than the saint that you are! I'd kill every person who's tarnished your name if I could!"

"That won't be necessary," the Evil Queen said. "I have another task for you. It requires a great deal of traveling, and since being the most wanted fugitive alive prevents me from doing it myself, I've called you here."

The Huntsman grew quiet and lowered his head shamefully.

"Your Greatness," he said. "I have grown too old to travel. I can barely walk as it is."

The Evil Queen looked down at him with an angry brow.

"You imbecile," she said, raising her voice. "You mean to tell me you traveled all the way here to tell me you are useless?"

The Huntsman rose to his feet with difficulty.

"Not at all, My Queen," he said. "Please let me explain. I am far too old to serve you, but my *daughter* is able and willing to help you complete what I cannot."

"Daughter?" the Evil Queen asked.

The doors at the end of the hall opened again. This time, a woman entered dragging a large wagon behind her. She was tall and thin with hair so dark red, it seemed to have a violet tint. Her eyes were bright green and her clothing was made entirely of plants and leaves and other greenery.

The wagon she pulled contained a large square object. It was large and flat and was covered in a silk cloth for safety.

After seeing her, the Evil Queen could recall a time many years ago when she had known the Huntsman's daughter. She had always been a shy little girl and had lived with her father in the palace when the Evil Queen was on the throne.

"You've grown up," the Evil Queen said.

The Huntsman's daughter nodded in her direction.

"You will speak when I address you!" the Evil Queen demanded.

"My daughter is mute, Your Majesty," the Huntsman said. "She's never said a word in her life. However silent she may be, it does not make her any less capable of doing what you ask of her. She's brought you a gift to prove herself."

The Huntsman's daughter carefully removed the object from her wagon and gently placed it beside the queen's Magic Mirror. Once it was positioned correctly, she removed the silk cloth. It was a mirror, smaller than the Magic Mirror; it was circular, with flowers engraved into a square, golden frame.

The Evil Queen knew exactly what it was the second it was revealed.

"The Mirror of Truth," she said. The former queen had acquired it during her reign. It was another magic mirror that showed one's true self when one stood before it.

"How did you get this?" the Evil Queen asked.

"She broke into the palace to retrieve it for you," the Huntsman said.

The Evil Queen touched the Mirror of Truth's frame; she had forgotten the detail in the carvings. She turned and faced the Huntsman's daughter.

"You shall be my *Huntress*," the Evil Queen declared.

The Huntress bowed and kissed the queen's hand.

"What is the task at hand, Your Majesty?" the Huntsman asked.

"Have either of you ever heard of the Wishing Spell?" the Evil Queen asked.

The Huntsman and the Huntress curiously looked to each other.

"No, My Queen," the Huntsman said. "Unless you are speaking of the old, foolish fable?"

"The very one," she said. "I never took it seriously until I recently heard a prisoner in the dungeon mumbling about it moments before his execution. According to the 'foolish fable,' after a group of select objects are collected and placed together, the collector is granted one wish. It doesn't matter how great or small, the wish is guaranteed to be granted. And, as you know, I have a wish to be

granted."

"You want my daughter to collect these items for you, then?" the Huntsman asked.

"Precisely," the Evil Queen said. "From what I've learned, the task is very dangerous and may take some time, but if she succeeds, I will consider whatever debt you owe diminished."

The Huntsman looked to his daughter, and the Huntress nodded.

"Very well," he said. "She will do it. What are the items you seek, My Queen?"

The Evil Queen took her place before her Magic Mirror, extended her open palms, and gazed deep inside it.

"Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, what must we seek for the Wishing Spell that grants all?" she asked.

The ghostly silhouette appeared again.

"Glass that housed a lonely soul up 'til midnight's final toll.
A saber from the deepest sea, meant for a groom's mortality.
The bark of a basket held in fright while running from a bark with bite.
A stony crown that's made to share, found deep within a savage lair.
A needle that pierced the lovely skin of a princess with beauty found within.
A wavy lock of golden rope that once was freedom's only hope.
Glittering jewels whose value increased after preserving the false deceased.
Teardrops of a maiden fairy feeling neither magical nor merry."

"There you have it," the Evil Queen said to the Huntsman and the Huntress. But the Magic Mirror was not finished.

"But listen to this, my fair queen, for I offer you a fair warning.
For one wish you are willing to pay any price, unaware that the Wishing Spell can only happen twice,
And the spell can only happen once more, for it was already used once before.
In this castle, as we stand, a duo move throughout the land.
A young brother and sister collect at a quick pace, and may defeat my queen in the Wishing Spell race."

The man in the mirror faded away, leaving the queen with the worst possible news. Not only was someone else after the objects she needed, but if they were used before she could collect them, the spell could never be used again.

She closed her eyes and thought about what her next move would be; she couldn't afford to have any more odds stacked against her. After a lifetime of work, she wasn't about to let two children stand in her way.

"I want you to start retrieving the items," the Evil Queen said to the Huntress. "I will handle the brother and sister. Now, leave me."

The Huntsman and the Huntress bowed and left the queen alone in the great hall.

The Evil Queen stood before the Mirror of Truth. Years of being a prisoner had taken its toll on her appearance. It was painful for her to see the aging woman who her reflection had become.

She picked up her heart of stone and examined it closely, lightly stroking its sides. The Evil Queen looked back up at the Mirror of Truth. This time there was no reflection of the disheveled woman she had grown into; this time the face staring back at her was a youthful one.

It belonged to a beautiful young maiden with pale skin and long, dark hair. She wore a long, white dress with a matching ribbon tied around the waist and was also holding the heart of stone.

The girl smiled, but the Evil Queen did not smile back. She knew the girl in the mirror very well, and she was not Snow White….

CHAPTER NINE

THE CHARMING KINGDOM

Alex and Conner woke up on the floor of Rapunzel's tower just after sunrise. They were snuggled under the blankets Froggy had given them and they'd used their bags as pillows.

"How did you sleep?" Alex asked her brother.

"Like I slept on the floor of a tower," Conner said, thinking he'd never take his bed at home for granted again. He stretched his back, and his joints made sounds like firecrackers.

They put away their blankets and decided to get an early start on their day. Alex insisted on tidying up the tower, leaving it in better condition than they had found it in.

"I'd hate for anyone to think we made this mess," Alex said. Conner rolled his eyes at her and made sure she saw it.

"What's our next stop?" Conner asked Alex. She looked back and forth from the map in one hand and the journal in the other.

"Well, the Charming Kingdom is just east of here," Alex said. "I figure it would be wisest to go there and see if we can get ahold of Cinderella's slipper."

"And how exactly are we going to do that?" Conner asked.

Alex had to think about it. "We'll just ask if we can borrow it," she decided.

"Fat chance," Conner said. "That's like walking into the White House and asking for the Declaration of Independence."

Although Conner was wrong about the whereabouts of the Declaration of Independence, Alex knew he was right to be concerned. How were they going to get their hands on one of Cinderella's slippers? Surely they must be the most prized possessions of the kingdom.

"We'll have to try our best," Alex said. "What other option do we have?"

The twins traveled down the spiral staircase in the core of Rapunzel's tower and returned to the path. They eventually came to a fork, where a new path splintered off in an eastern direction. The sign above the fork said CHARMING KINGDOM and pointed in the direction the new path was headed.

"Conner, look at the sign!" said Alex, pressing her hands against her cheeks. "Now I really wish I had a camera!"

They traveled down the new path for quite a while without discovering anything new but the same dirt path and evergreen trees they had seen for the last two days. Conner became more anxious the farther he walked, letting out large extended sighs every minute or so.

"Are you sure we aren't lost? I swear I've seen that boulder and that tree about twenty times already," he said, pointing.

"I'm positive we're traveling in the right direction. I've been watching the map since we left," Alex said. "We should be approaching a stream very soon, and once we cross it we'll be in the Charming Kingdom!"

Conner sighed again. It would be his last one for a while, so he made sure it lasted extra long.

A couple of hours later, there was no stream in sight. Conner was starting to lose faith in his sister's navigational abilities.

"This place must be bigger than we thought," Alex said. "Or this map is completely off scale."

Eventually, the twins found the stream Alex had seen on the map. The path went across a small

bridge made out of pale stones and then continued on the other side.

"You see, I told you I knew what I was doing," Alex said with her head held high.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Conner said.

"Honestly, Conner, I'm a little disappointed in your lack of faith," Alex gloated. "If there's one place I should know my way around in, it would have to be—"

"Grrrrrrrrrr!"

Conner heard his sister's high-pitched scream before he realized what had happened. A large troll had jumped right in front of them on the bridge. He was short and very wide with an enormous head. He was covered in matted fur with large eyes and a snout. His arms and legs were tiny, but his nails and teeth were sharp and long.

"You are on *my* bridge!" the troll shouted. "How dare you!"

"We're so sorry!" said Alex, clutching on to her brother like a monkey to a tree. "We had no idea this bridge belonged to anyone!"

"Maybe you should put up a sign or something," Conner suggested, and then regretted it once it made the troll even angrier.

"What are you doing on *my* bridge?" the troll demanded.

"Trying to cross into the Charming Kingdom," Alex said. "We didn't mean any harm!"

"No one crosses my bridge without answering a riddle!" the troll said.

"A riddle?" Alex asked, letting go of Conner. "Oh! You're a bridge troll!"

"A bridge troll?" Conner asked.

"Yes, just like in 'Three Billy Goats Gruff '!" Alex said happily. She was so excited to be witnessing another fairy-tale occurrence, all her fear faded away.

"If you wish to cross my bridge, you must answer my riddle correctly!" the bridge troll said. "Answer incorrectly, and I'll bite off your head!"

"Excuse me? Bite off our heads?" Conner said. Steam was practically coming from his ears. "What is wrong with everyone in this place? Why does everyone we meet want to eat us? Can someone please explain to me why this keeps happening?"

"Conner, calm down!" Alex insisted. "Let's just solve the riddle, and then we'll be on our way."

"What if we get the riddle wrong?" Conner said. "He'll kill us! Let's just find another way across the stream—"

"Conner, don't be silly! If a simple billy goat can answer a riddle correctly, I'm sure we can, too," Alex reassured him. "Besides, there isn't another bridge for miles."

Conner grunted and crossed his arms.

"How are we so sure that this is actually *his* bridge?" Conner said. "I'd like to see some ownership identification before we continue."

Alex ignored this.

"What's your riddle, Mr. Bridge Troll?" she asked. "May I call you Mr. Bridge Troll?"

The bridge troll eyed the twins and jauntily swayed from side to side as he began the riddle.

"What can be as small as a pea or as large as the sky and is not owned by the person who purchases it?" it asked.

The wheels in Alex's head began turning immediately. She loved riddles.

"That's a tricky one!" Alex said, and pressed her index finger against her lips as she thought. "Do you have any guesses, Conner?"

"Nope, you're on your own," Conner said.

"You have one guess before I bite off your head, so guess wisely!" the bridge troll said, doing a small dance and clapping his hands.

"That's it. I'm out of here!" Conner said. He walked off the bridge and slowly made his way down to the stream.

"Conner, what are you doing?" Alex called out.

"I'm crossing the stream!" Conner yelled back. "No bridge is worth that much trouble!"

He slowly stepped into the stream and began traveling across it. The water was freezing, but his frustration kept him warm enough that it didn't matter. The water rose higher and higher as he traveled farther across it.

"It's not that deep, Alex!" Conner said. "The current isn't even that strong!"

He reached the middle of the stream, and at its deepest the water came to just above his waist.

"You're cheating!" Alex said, and then asked the bridge troll, "Is that even allowed? Can he do that?"

"He isn't the one who asked for the riddle. *You* are!" the bridge troll said.

Conner had crossed the stream by now and was soaking wet. Alex continued thinking about the riddle.

"So, it can be as small as a pea and as large as the sky, so basically you're telling me that it can be any size. And the person who buys it doesn't own it, so that means someone else owns it," she thought out loud.

"Hurry up, Alex!" Conner shouted.

"Oh, hush!" Alex said. "I'm going to say that it must be… *a gift*! A gift can be any size and the receiver is who owns it, not the person who purchases it!"

The bridge troll stopped swaying from side to side and slumped over.

"That is correct," the bridge troll said disappointedly. "You may pass."

Alex clapped her hands together and did a small jump. She extended her hand out to offer the troll a handshake, but he ignored it. Instead, he crawled back below to wherever he had jumped out from.

"See!" Alex said once she'd met up with her brother on the other side of the bridge. "I knew I'd answer it correctly!"

Conner shook his head. "And I'm sure I'll have to hear about it for the rest of our lives," he said. "But let's try to make it to Cinderella's palace by sundown, okay?"

The twins continued their journey into the Charming Kingdom. They were excited to see different scenery as they traveled. The evergreen trees they had seen so much of became scarce and were slowly replaced by large oak trees. There were also vast fields of tall grass and wildflowers everywhere they looked.

"It's so beautiful here!" Alex said.

They had been walking for hours and still saw no sign of anything. Conner was practically dry by now.

"Where is everything?" Conner asked.

"The Charming Kingdom is a very big place," Alex said. "It's going to take a while to get to the palace."

It began to get dark, and the twins became very worried; there was no shelter in sight. Soon, the moon was their only source of light.

They walked a short distance off the path and found a grassy area among a few trees that they assumed (and hoped) was safe, and they decided to spend the night there. Conner tried making a fire by rubbing two sticks together but was unsuccessful.

"Now I really wish I had signed up for Boy Scouts," he said.

It was their first night sleeping outside. Both kept waking up every hour or so to make sure they were still safe, because every sound terrified them.

"What was that?" Alex gasped in the middle of the night.

"That's an owl," Conner said. "Or a very inquisitive dove, but either way I think we're safe."

The next morning, the sunrise woke them. They restlessly got to their feet and returned to the path.

"We're running out of food," Alex said after eating one of their last apples. "We'll have to stock up as soon as we find a market or something."

"I'm so tired of rolls and apples. I'm starting to think we should have asked Froggy to pack us some flies," Conner said. "Gosh, I would kill for a cheeseburger! Maybe that's why everyone eats each other here; they just haven't discovered fast food yet."

They found a small pond on the side of the path and splashed some water on their faces.

"We look so tired," said Alex, looking at their reflections in the water.

The twins heard a galloping sound coming from behind them on the path. They turned to see a small cart of firewood being pulled by a gray horse. It was steered by a man with a big, floppy, green hat.

"Let's ask him how much farther until the palace!" Alex said, and ran over to the cart. "Excuse me, sir?"

"Whoa," the man said, slowing his horse to a stop. "May I help you?"

"How much farther until we reach Cinderella's palace?" Alex asked.

"Are you traveling by foot?" the man asked.

"Unfortunately," Conner said.

"Then it'll take you days to get there," the man said.

Alex and Conner looked at each other, completely exasperated.

"I'm delivering this firewood near the palace tonight," the man said. "I can give you a ride if you'd like."

Before he could finish his sentence, Conner had climbed aboard the cart.

"Thank you so much!" Alex said. "That is so kind of you!"

The twins traveled with the man for the rest of the day. Conner made himself comfortable on top of the firewood and napped almost the entire trip, waking up every so often whenever they hit a bump in the road. Alex, on the other hand, took full advantage of having an actual human to talk to from the fairy-tale world.

"What's your name?" Alex asked the man.

"Smithers," the man said.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"I grew up in a small village in the northeastern part of the Charming Kingdom," Smithers said.

"What's it like here?" Alex said dreamily. "My brother and I… um… haven't been around this kingdom very much."

"The Charming Kingdom is a quiet place," Smithers said. "It has many small villages on the outskirts of the kingdom and many wealthy estates in the center, near the palace."

"Have you ever been to the palace before?" Alex asked.

"Oh, yes, I make many deliveries there during the year," he said. "In fact, tonight the king and queen are having a huge ball."

"They are?" Alex's eyes doubled in size. She shook Conner awake. "Conner, did you hear that? Cinderella's having a ball tonight! Isn't that wonderful? What are the chances?"

"What? Oh… er… that's great," Conner said, and then immediately fell back asleep.

"Why are they having a ball?" Alex asked.

"They've had one every month since their wedding," Smithers said. "It's a celebration of their marriage."

"What's Queen Cinderella like?" she asked.

"Absolutely beautiful, and the best queen our kingdom has ever had," Smithers said with a big grin. "Not too many people were eager to accept her when she first moved into the palace, though. Many of the aristocratic families were upset that Prince Charming hadn't chosen one of their daughters to wed. But she's overcome all that since."

Alex could tell they were getting much closer to the palace. They passed more small villages, which grew in size and population as they went along. She was so excited to be so close to people, actual *people*, who had spent their entire lives in the fairy-tale world. She wished with all her heart she could say she'd grown up in the Charming Kingdom.

"Do you ever find it overwhelming?" Alex asked Smithers. "Does it ever get frightening living here and knowing that at any moment a fairy could fly by and grant you a wish, or an ogre could run up and eat you?"

Smithers looked at her curiously. "Does such a place exist where people can't unexpectedly be helped or hurt?"

Alex couldn't think of any. Maybe this world and the world she was from weren't so different after all.

The cart began passing large estates. Everywhere they looked, they saw another huge, elegant home. They were all so bright and colorful, with pointed roofs that curved on the sides. Some were made from wood, others from brick, and some were covered completely in ivy.

It was something straight out of a storybook, and Alex kept reminding herself that she was in one.

"We're almost at the palace," Smithers said.

The cart began to vibrate as the dirt path beneath them turned into a cobblestone street. Shops and markets started popping up on the sides of the street as they traveled into the city. They shared the road with other carts and carriages. Villagers and townspeople alike walked alongside them and went about their day-to-day routines of shopping and trade.

"Are we there yet?" said Conner, stirring back to life.

The cart rounded a corner onto a very long and wide street. At the end of the street was an enormous palace.

"I'll take *that* as a yes," Conner said.

The palace took Alex's breath away. It was perfectly symmetrical and smooth, as if it were made out of sky-gray porcelain. Three prominent towers in the middle of the palace shared a base with a gigantic clock large enough for the whole kingdom to see. The palace almost seemed fake, it was so majestic, and was grander than they had ever imagined.

"This is where I'll drop you off," said Smithers, pulling his cart and horse over to the side of the

street. “Best of luck to both of you youngins. Enjoy the town!”

“Thank you so much!” the twins said together.

They tried to offer him a few gold coins as a thank-you, but Smithers insisted that they save their money, and then went on his way.

The twins walked around the town for a good while. Everyone seemed to be buzzing with anticipation for the ball later that evening.

They found a small market and were able to purchase fresh fruit, vegetables, and breads. Alex kept trying to make small talk with every person she encountered, but most of the townspeople ignored her.

Conner kept rolling his eyes at his sister; *everything* she saw excited her.

“I don’t know how I’m going to survive traveling with you if you keep up this constant state of excitement,” Conner said. “It’s exhausting, and it’s really getting on my nerves.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said. “We’ve been around so many trees the last couple of days. I’m just so excited to see all the people and their—ooooh! Look at that doorknob on that building! It’s in the shape of a slipper! Isn’t that cute?”

After a busy afternoon of sightseeing, they found a quiet hill that overlooked the town, and they sat under the shade of a large tree. The sun was starting to descend, and the twins grew anxious at the thought of another day ending.

“What’s our plan?” Conner asked.

“Let’s see what the journal suggests,” Alex said, and pulled it out from her school bag. She flipped through the pages until she came across the section about the glass slipper.

Cinderella’s glass slipper is a very difficult item to retrieve. Her slippers, without doubt, are the most cherished possession of the kingdom.

First, you must find a way into the palace. This is rather difficult, as there is only one entrance. One of Cinderella’s first acts as queen was to get rid of all the servant entrances, so that when people come to the palace, they all enter as equals.

Once inside, find a way into Cinderella’s royal display room. This will also be difficult, since no one is allowed in the queen’s chambers without an invitation from her. The slippers are on display in a glass box on the top of a pillar in the center of the room.

The slippers are not hard to remove from inside the glass box, but the room is under constant watch by two guards at its entrance. Find a way to be alone in the royal display room and remove a slipper quietly and quickly.

Leave as fast as you can, because as soon as they notice something is missing, the guards will close the palace doors, and you’ll be trapped and taken to the dungeon to be hung upside down from your toenails. Best of luck!

“How are we going to get into the palace?” Conner asked.

Alex began to think of a plan, but she was distracted by a long line of carriages driving down the main street of the town toward the palace. They were elegant and colorful, and each was of its own design. Each carriage had at least two horses pulling it, a coachman, a footman riding on the back,

and a number of passengers inside.

"The ball," Alex said. "We'll have to sneak into the ball!"

"Uh-huh," said Conner, contemplating this information. "And what are we supposed to wear? Look at us! We're not dressed formally enough! And I bet we smell really fresh after walking for three days straight with no showers!"

"I have an idea," Alex said.

She opened their bags and took out their blankets. She grabbed hold of Conner and began wrapping the blanket around him, folding it strategically in certain places so it would stay up. Alex wrapped herself in the other blanket.

"There," Alex said. "Now we look like we're wearing sensible robes!"

"We look ridiculous," Conner said.

"Do you have any other ideas?" Alex asked him.

"Do you think there's a fairy godmother hotline we could call?" Conner asked.

The twins walked down to the main street. They followed the traffic of carriages toward the palace. The closer they came to the palace, the larger it grew and the more real it became.

Many of the coachmen glared at the twins with bewildered and judgmental looks. A few passengers leaned out of their carriage windows to see what the twins were doing.

"Take a picture—it lasts longer!" Conner shouted at them.

"Conner! They don't know what that means!" Alex said.

They reached the palace just as the sun was setting. As each carriage neared the front steps of the palace's entrance, its footman would run around the carriage and gently help the passengers out.

Alex and Conner had never seen such beautiful clothing. All the women wore long ball gowns of various colors, fabrics, and stitching. They wore gloves and diamonds; some wore bows and feathers in their hair. The men all dressed beautifully, too, some in formal armor and some in suits with broad, fringed shoulders and square cuffs.

All the effort and flair that the guests had put into their appearance made the twins feel very insecure about their impromptu robes. They stuck out like sore thumbs. They were the youngest people there, they were the only ones not dressed in lace or satin, and they were the only ones carrying bags. They looked exactly like what they were: a couple of kids sneaking into a ball.

An extensive row of steps led up to the palace's entrance. Alex and Conner began climbing them with the rest of the attendees. It was such a climb, they wondered if they would ever reach the top of it.

"This world has goblins and fairies, but where's an escalator when you need one?" Conner said.

"Conner!" Alex gasped. "Look at this!"

She pointed to a silver star placed in the steps underneath their feet. It said:

THIS MARKS THE VERY PLACE
WHERE CINDERELLA LEFT HER
GLASS SLIPPER BEHIND
ON THE NIGHT SHE MET
PRINCE CHARMING.

“Can you believe that’s the very spot Cinderella left her glass slipper?” Alex said with both hands pressed against her heart.

“Absolutely,” Conner said. “I wouldn’t have climbed these steps again if I had left my shoe, either.”

The twins caused quite a scene at the entrance. Everyone was absolutely appalled by their clothing. Alex could feel herself blushing from the way everyone was staring at her; she felt like she was back at school.

One palace guard in particular couldn’t stop staring at them—not in a judgmental way, but as if he had seen them somewhere before and couldn’t remember where. He was standing just a step inside the palace entrance, and he greeted all the guests as they passed him. He wore more badges on his uniform than any other of the guards, and he had a very thin, dark beard.

Another palace guard was collecting invitations at the doors. The twins began to panic.

“What are we going to do?” Alex whispered to her brother.

“Let me handle this,” Conner said. “I saw this in a movie once. Just go with it.”

“Invitations, please,” the guard said.

“Our parents have our invitations, but they’re already inside,” Conner said.

“And who are your parents?” asked the guard snootily.

“Who are our parents?” yelled Conner, causing a bigger scene than they had already. “You mean, you don’t know who we are?”

All the guards and guests looked among one another.

“Conner, calm down!” Alex said. What was he thinking?

“This man doesn’t know who our parents are, Alex!” Conner continued. “I’ll have you know that our parents invented wishing wells! How dare you show us any disrespect!”

Alex wanted to slap him. She looked apologetically at the people around them. They all scowled in the twins’ direction, except for the guard with the thin beard. He was actually smirking at them with gentleness in his eyes.

“I’m afraid you two have to leave now,” said the guard collecting the invitations.

“Leave? You’re making the heirs to the wishing-well fortune leave?” Conner exclaimed loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“Conner. Just. Shut. Up,” Alex whispered directly into his ear.

“Is there a problem?” the guard with the thin beard asked as he approached the twins.

“Not at all!” Alex said, and began backing up, forcing Conner to move with her.

“They don’t have an invitation,” the other guard said.

“We were just leaving!” Alex said. “Sorry for the confusion.”

“Nonsense,” the guard with the thin beard said. “I just saw your parents inside the palace. Why don’t I take you to them?”

Alex and Conner froze.

“You did?” Conner said, and then quickly remembered that he had to keep up with his own lie. “I mean, of course you did!” He threw a dirty look to the other guard.

“Come with me, and I’ll take you straight to your parents,” the guard with the thin beard said.

Before they knew it, Alex and Conner were being escorted into the palace. They were completely in over their heads. Did this guard know they were lying, and was he now escorting them directly to the dungeon? Or perhaps Conner’s lie was truer than they thought, and they were about to meet a

couple that were definitely not their parents.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the guard said. "I'm Sir Lampton, the head of the queen's Royal Guard. Welcome to the palace!"

"Thank you," Conner said. "I'm Conner *Wishington*, and this is my sister, Alex."

"Where are you from, Mr. and Ms. Wishington?" Lampton asked.

"Upstate Northern Kingdom," Conner said. Even he looked surprised by the words coming out of his mouth. "But our parents have a summer home in the south of the Sleeping Kingdom and a condo in the Fairy Kingdom."

Alex's eyes opened so wide that she had to remind herself to blink.

"Ah… I see," Lampton said with a curious look. "Would you like me to take your bags for you?"

"No, that's quite all right," Alex said. "We'll manage."

Lampton led the twins down a long hallway behind all the other guests. There were many large portraits of past rulers on the walls, and a red carpet ran under their feet. Alex and Conner were all eyes; they had never been inside a royal palace before. There were so many shiny things to look at.

Lampton seemed to be enjoying their excitement. He leaned between them and softly said, "You're sneaking into the palace, aren't you?"

Alex desperately looked to Conner, but he was out of lies for the night.

"Please don't throw us in the dungeon!" Alex pleaded. "We didn't mean any harm."

Conner looked at his sister with a raised eyebrow. Did she mean no harm *besides* breaking into the place and stealing a cherished item?

Lampton chuckled. "I've seen a lot of youngsters try to sneak into a royal ball before, but never have I been so entertained by such an attempt," he said.

"So, you aren't going to throw us in a cell and hang us upside down by our toenails?" Conner asked.

"We stopped doing that ages ago," Lampton said. "On the contrary, it would be my honor to show you two around."

"Really?" Conner said.

"That would be lovely!" Alex said, clasping her hands together. "Thank you!"

At the end of the hall, Lampton led the twins through a pair of golden doors into the ballroom.

At first, the sight was overwhelming. There were so many things to look at, it was impossible to focus on any one thing long enough to comprehend what it was. There was so much movement and color.

The biggest chandelier they had ever seen, with thousands of candles, hung from the ceiling above an enormous dance floor. Hundreds of formally dressed men and women filled the space. Some mingled on the sides while others danced to the music played by a small orchestra in the corner.

Everything from the archways to the accents on the walls was golden. A grand staircase descended in the back of the room just behind two empty thrones.

Conner knew it would only be a few seconds before Alex started crying.

"It's so beautiful!" Alex said, with teary eyes. "Is this where they had the ball where Cinderella and the prince met?"

"Indeed," Lampton said. "I'll never forget it. I was just a simple guard back then. The prince was meeting all the young women in the kingdom in hopes of finding a bride. Cinderella was the last to arrive that night. She entered the room, just as we are now, and everyone stopped to look at her."

"How did she look?" Alex asked.

"Magical," Lampton said with a smile, lost in his own memory. "She wore a long, violet dress that sparkled as she walked. I remember hearing the soft taps of her glass slippers as she walked past. As soon as the prince saw her, it was love at first sight; the whole palace could feel it."

Suddenly, a man blew a trumpet at the foot of the grand staircase.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the man with the trumpet announced. "It is with great honor that I welcome you to the royal ball this evening. Now, please give a warm welcome to Their Royal Majesties King Charming and Queen Cinderella!"

The guests cheered and burst into applause. The royal couple entered the ballroom, slowly making their way down the grand staircase. Alex grabbed on to Conner's arm.

"Conner," Alex gasped. "It's Cinderella! It's Cinderella!"

Although the twins had only seen illustrations of her, Cinderella was more beautiful than they had ever expected. Her hair was auburn and styled up behind a crystal tiara. She wore white gloves and a long, turquoise gown flowed down around her, accentuating her pregnant belly. Despite all the gold and the glorious chandelier, her eyes and smile were the brightest things in the room.

King Charming was the definition of dashing. He was every bit as handsome as any description ever written about him. He had a mesmerizing smile and thick, wavy hair under a large, golden crown. He could easily have been a movie star back in the twins' world.

The king and queen took their seats on the thrones, and the guard with the trumpet blew the opening notes of another announcement.

"Let the ball begin!" the guard with the trumpet proclaimed, and was greeted with another round of excited applause.

The majority of the guests rushed to the dance floor. The orchestra began playing a fast-paced symphony. All the guests paired up and began waltzing around the room, each looking lovingly into their partner's eyes the entire time.

The king and queen remained seated. You could tell Cinderella wanted to join the dance, but her pregnancy was preventing her from doing so. King Charming only had eyes for his wife; he was enjoying her watching the dance more than the actual dance itself.

At one point, each of the dancing men collected a shoe from their partners and circled them with it before placing it back on their feet—a Cinderellian tribute, no doubt.

Time flew by as the twins watched the ball.

The unborn child Cinderella was carrying must have been kicking from all the excitement. Cinderella appeared to have some discomfort, and had been rubbing her belly and shifting in her seat for some time. She eventually whispered something into King Charming's ear. King Charming took his wife's hand and carefully helped her back up the grand staircase.

The guard blew his trumpet again. "The queen is tired and wishes to rest, but she and the king welcome you to continue this celebration without their presence."

The crowd happily obliged and continued their fun.

"Would you like a tour of the palace?" Lampton asked the twins.

"More than anything!" Alex said.

Lampton escorted the twins out of the ballroom and down a hall similar to the one they had first entered the palace through. It, too, was home to several portraits of past rulers and a long, red carpet.

"This palace was built over five hundred years ago," Lampton told them as he walked. "It's been

home to the Charming Dynasty since then. This is a portrait of King Chester Charming, Cinderella's late father-in-law."

He referred to a large painting of an old, bearded man with a crown. He looked exactly like his son, but much older.

"How many King Charmings have there been?" Conner asked.

"We've lost count," Lampton said. "There are three currently. King Chester had four sons: Chance Charming, Chase Charming, Chandler Charming, and Charlie Charming."

Each of the Charming brothers had his own portrait on the wall.

"King Chance Charming is the oldest and is married to Queen Cinderella," Lampton said, and gestured to the portrait of the man they had just seen in the ballroom.

"King Chase Charming is the second oldest and is married to Queen Sleeping Beauty," Lampton continued.

Chase looked exactly like his brother, except he was a bit taller and wore a goatee.

"King Chandler Charming is the third oldest and is married to Queen Snow White," Lampton said.

Chandler looked like his brothers, but had the longest hair of all of them.

The last portrait in the hallway caught the twins' eye the most. It was hung slightly away from the rest and depicted the youngest of the Charming brothers. He was young and had a big smile. A single candle was lit beside the portrait; it appeared to be a memorial of sorts.

"Who is that?" Conner asked Lampton.

Lampton's happy expression faded away. "That's Prince Charlie, the fourth son of King Chester. He's the long-lost Charming prince," Lampton said. "He vanished one night many years ago, and no one ever saw him again."

"That's horrible," Alex said.

"His brothers led massive search parties throughout all the kingdoms, but they never found a trace of him," Lampton said sadly. "Fortunately, some good came out of the search. While on the road, Prince Chandler came across Snow White in her glass coffin, and Prince Chase discovered Sleeping Beauty asleep in her castle, and they both broke the spells put on them and were married."

"That's incredible!" Alex said. "So if Prince Charlie never went missing, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White would still be unconscious!"

"That may be," Lampton said. "And since his brothers took all the eligible princesses, Prince Chance had to put on the ball where he met Cinderella. Everything happens for a reason, I suppose."

Alex and Conner couldn't stop staring at the portrait of Prince Charlie. There was a sad energy in this part of the hallway, and the twins were especially sensitive to it. The long-lost prince couldn't have been much older than them when he'd gone missing.

Lampton clearly appreciated the twins' interest. "Now, follow me, I have something very special I want to show you," Lampton said.

Lampton led the twins down another hallway that led deeper into the palace. This part of the palace was completely vacant, and it made the twins more and more nervous as they walked. They had no idea where Lampton was taking them, and they were too timid to ask.

They rounded a corner, and at the end of another long hall was a pair of black double doors. There were two guards on either side of the doors and a large stone arch above them with a sign that read QUEEN CINDERELLA'S ROYAL ROOM OF DISPLAY.

Alex and Conner looked to each other with light in their eyes. They had made it!

"Hello, Sir Lampton," one of the guards said.

"Good evening," Lampton said. He pushed opened the doors, and the twins followed him inside. They set their bags down and looked around the room.

The display room was a wide chamber with white pillars and a sky-blue tiled floor. The ceiling was domed and covered in golden stars. The room was illuminated by moonlight coming from a large window in the back and then reflected throughout by a series of hanging mirrors.

Several special objects were on display and placed on the top of short pillars and surrounded by thick glass cases. Brooms, buckets, and old raggedy dresses were all put on show. A family of mice lived in a glass case in a miniature replica of the palace.

In the very center of the room were Cinderella's glass slippers. They were beautiful and petite, made from pure crystal glass and decorated with diamonds.

The twins could feel their hearts sink into the pits of their stomachs as soon as they saw them. They were so close!

"Those are beautiful," Alex said. The slippers had put her in a trance.

"I'm quite partial to them myself," said a soft voice that didn't belong to Alex, Conner, or Lampton.

Sitting on the windowsill in the back of the room was Cinderella herself. They had been so astonished by the display room, they hadn't noticed her.

"Your Majesty," Lampton said. "Please forgive me; I didn't see you there. I was just giving some guests a tour of the palace."

"Quite all right, Sir Lampton," Cinderella said, and walked across the chamber to greet them. "I like to come in here occasionally after long days to clear my head. Who might these two be?"

Alex and Conner couldn't speak. They were completely starstruck.

"This is Alex and Conner," Lampton told her.

"Pleasure to meet you," Cinderella said, and held out her hand.

"We're big fans!" Conner said, and shook her hand a little too hard.

Alex couldn't move. "You're… like, my hero," Alex said to her, and that's all she could manage to say.

"Thank you, sweetheart," Cinderella said. "Welcome to my little room of memories."

"It's… *remarkable*!" Alex squeaked.

"Would you like me to show you around?" Cinderella asked.

Alex still couldn't move her limbs but was able to nod.

Cinderella began a small tour and took them around the room to each of the items on display.

"These are the brooms and buckets I used to clean my stepmother's house every day," Cinderella said. "They were my first dancing partners. I remember, whenever I was home alone, I used to dance with them around the house and pretend I was at a big royal dance. Although, I must say they weren't the best at conversation."

Cinderella and Lampton laughed. Alex and Conner were still in shock that they were in her presence. *They were standing next to* Cinderella*! And she had a sense of humor!*

"Over here are my raggedy old clothes that my Fairy Godmother turned into a beautiful ball gown," Cinderella continued. "They're not much to look at now, but whenever my Fairy Godmother visits us, they turn back into the beautiful ball gown she created for me."

"That's really cool," Conner said.

“These are my mice,” Cinderella said, and showed the twins the miniature palace full of mice. She opened a latch and took a mouse out of the case. She gently petted it, and it peacefully nestled in her hand.

“Are they the mice that were transformed into horses and coachmen for your carriage?” Alex asked, finally finding her voice.

“The original mice passed away, but these are their children and their children’s children,” Cinderella said. “I look after them as a thank-you. They have a horrible reputation, but mice are actually very gentle creatures. You just have to give them a chance.”

Cinderella put the mouse back with the others and walked to the center of the room.

“And these, I believe, need no explanation,” she said, and brought the twins to the glass slippers. She removed the glass case entirely and took one of the glass slippers in her hand.

“Those couldn’t have been comfortable,” Conner said.

“They were surprisingly easy to move about in,” Cinderella said.

“Did your feet ever get sweaty?” Conner went on. “That couldn’t have looked really—*uhh*!” Alex elbowed him in the ribs.

Cinderella snickered.

“Would you like to hold one?” Cinderella asked them.

Alex nodded harder than she had ever nodded before. Cinderella gently lifted one from the pillar and handed it to her. A magical feeling went through Alex. She was holding a piece of fairy-tale history. Perhaps the most famous object of all fantasy time was in her hands. She couldn’t help but get a bit emotional.

Conner, on the other hand, kept thinking of ways to steal the slipper. Alex looked up at her brother and knew what he was thinking by the intensity in his eyes. For a moment they shared the same thought. Was it possible to take off with it? Conner was actually thinking if it was possible to outrun Lampton and the two guards outside the door.

“What was it like?” Alex asked Cinderella. “What was it like to go from being a servant to being queen? What was it like to be saved from a horrible situation? Your life is literally… well… a Cinderella story.”

A sadness came to Cinderella’s face.

“I never thought my life would change so drastically, so I always made the most of what I had,” Cinderella said. “I always laugh at the term *Cinderella story*, because, if you ask me, it doesn’t matter what life you’re living, life never has a solution. No matter how hard the struggles are that you leave behind, new struggles always take their place.

“People forget that I wasn’t liked very much by the people of the Charming Kingdom when I first came to live at the palace,” Cinderella said. “Not too many people were thrilled with the idea of a servant girl becoming their queen. Many people called me *the Pumpkin Princess* or *the Mouse Monarch* when they first discovered the details of how I had come to the ball that night. I had to earn the kingdom’s respect, and it wasn’t easy.”

“Being a queen has to have some perks, though, right?” Conner asked. “No more scrubbing floors or dancing with cleaning supplies or talking to mice.”

“Meeting the man of my dreams and starting a family is the best thing that will ever happen to me,” Cinderella said with a smile, and rubbed her belly. “And that is what makes me the happiest and luckiest woman in the world. However, living a public life is a difficult thing to do, and even now I

still find it a bit overwhelming. No matter what you do, you can never please everyone. And that was the hardest lesson to learn. In fact, I'm still learning it."

This was all such a revelation to Alex. Suddenly, the fairy-tale world seemed even more real than it had before. She never thought she could respect Cinderella more than she already did, but she had never thought about the story from *her* point of view.

Alex set the glass slipper back beside the other one. At first Conner shot her a look: *What are you doing? We have to steal that!* But they both knew they couldn't take it; at least not tonight, not after the kindness they had been shown.

"After all the magical things that have happened in my life, this is my most prized possession," Cinderella said, her hands still on her pregnant stomach. "And she's going to be here any day now."

"How do you know it's a girl?" Alex asked.

"Mother's intuition," Cinderella said. "She never sits still when she hears music. So she must have my taste and her father's energy."

One of the guards from the hallway burst into the display room.

"Your Majesty, Sir Lampton, your presence has been requested in the ballroom," the guard said very seriously. Something was wrong.

"What's the matter?" Sir Lampton asked.

"Soldiers from the Northern Kingdom. They've come with a message for the king and queen," he said.

Lampton handed the twins their bags, and before they knew it the twins were following him, Cinderella, and the other guards out of the display room and down the hallway toward the ballroom.

"Now how are we going to get ahold of one of the glass slippers?" Conner whispered to Alex.

"We'll have to collect all the other items first and then come back for it," Alex said. "It should be easier to explain why we need it if we have the other items. We've already established a trusting relationship with them."

"I knew I should have grabbed one when I had the chance," Conner said.

They reentered the ballroom. All the guests were still and the orchestra was dead silent. Cinderella reunited with her husband at the thrones. Dozens of the same soldiers dressed in silver armor whom Alex and Conner had seen on their first day in the Land of Stories were now spread throughout the ballroom.

"Forgive our intrusion, Your Majesty. My name is Sir Grant. I am the head of Queen Snow White's Royal Guard. We have news regarding the Evil Queen," the leader of the soldiers said.

"What is it?" King Charming said.

Everyone in the room could tell it was not good news by his tone. You could have cut the tension and worry in the air with a knife.

"Last night, a magic mirror that belonged to the Evil Queen was stolen from her former chambers," Sir Grant said. "The Evil Queen is still very much at large, and that she has her former mirrors makes her a much greater threat to all of us. We are asking—*pleading*—if anyone in the Charming Kingdom knows anything about where the Evil Queen is hiding, that they please let us know immediately."

Snow White's soldiers filed out of the ballroom. King Charming and Cinderella embraced each other, worried both for themselves and for what the news meant for their kingdom.

"It was lovely to meet you children, but I must go now," Lampton said to them. He patted their

shoulders and then headed out after the soldiers.

Many of the guests began leaving as well. Alex and Conner followed them out, down the entrance steps, and away from the palace.

"This whole Evil Queen situation is starting to concern me," Alex said.

"I know, but it's not really our problem," Conner said. "We'll be long gone before anything else happens."

"I suppose so," Alex said.

"Where are we off to now?" Conner asked.

"The Little Red Riding Hood Kingdom is north of here," Alex said. "I say that's the best direction to head. I hope we have better luck getting hold of Red Riding Hood's basket."

"We'd better not chicken out this time," Conner said. "Gosh, we were *so close*!" He clenched a tight fist.

"We just couldn't have taken it, not without permission," Alex said. "It wouldn't have felt right."

"I'm so tired of being a good person," Conner said.

Despite having failed to collect a glass slipper and the abrupt end to their evening, the twins had had a pretty fantastic night. It wasn't every day that they got to have such an intimate conversation with one of the most famous women in history.

Luckily, the twins found a night driver transporting a cart full of pears to a village in the northern part of the Charming Kingdom. They convinced him to let them ride in the back of his carriage in exchange for a few gold coins. It would only be a few miles' walk to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom from there.

Conner fell asleep as soon as they climbed aboard. Alex couldn't sleep, so she decided to read through the journal again. She reached into her bag and was astounded to discover what was inside it.

"Conner!" Alex gasped.

Conner jumped back to consciousness. "What is it?" he asked.

He looked over and saw something very shiny in his sister's hand. His eyes were still a little blurry from sleeping, and he had to let them adjust before realizing what it was.

"A glass slipper!" Conner exclaimed, and Alex gestured for him to keep quiet so the driver wouldn't hear them. "How in the world did we get one? Did you steal it?"

"I thought it was you!" Alex's mouth was so wide, it could have fit a dozen of the pears inside it.

"No, it wasn't me, I swear! Do you think Lampton or Cinderella put it in your bag?" Conner asked. "Do you think one of them knew we needed it?"

"I have no idea," Alex said. She couldn't believe she was actually holding on to one of Cinderella's glass slippers. They both were completely dumbfounded.

"Looks like our trip to the Charming Kingdom wasn't such a waste after all," Conner said.

CHAPTER TEN

THE RED RIDING HOOD KINGDOM

The subtle shakes of the pear cart finally rocked Alex and Conner to sleep. If they hadn't been so exhausted from the previous restless night and eventful day, the shock of discovering the glass slipper in their possession would have kept them up all night.

The next morning, they awoke just as the cart was arriving at the northern village it was destined for. The first thing Alex did when she awoke was to make sure the slipper was still in her tight grip as it had been when she'd fallen asleep. She couldn't let go of it; she was afraid that if it wasn't in her hands at all times, it might disappear just as easily as it appeared.

The mystery of how it had gotten into her bag was still the most prominent thing on their minds.

"Do you think it was magic?" Conner asked Alex. "Maybe the slipper knew we needed it and transported itself into your bag?"

"I've read enough fantasy books to know that that's a possibility," Alex said. "And after everything we've been through, I wouldn't be surprised. But the point is, we have it now. It's one less item we have to collect, so let's focus all our energy into getting ahold of Red Riding Hood's basket."

She wrapped a blanket around the slipper for safekeeping and stored it in her bag. They didn't want any unwanted attention from carrying it around.

"I hope Cinderella or Lampton don't send soldiers after us once they realize it's gone," Conner said.

Alex hadn't thought about that. What if, as they were speaking, Lampton was putting together a band of soldiers to find them and take them into captivity?

"Then we'll tell him the truth and worry about it when it happens," Alex said. "But let's keep moving in the meantime."

There didn't appear to be any roads or paths on the map that went to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom, so the twins were forced to travel straight through a forest of elm trees to get there.

Alex read from the journal as they walked.

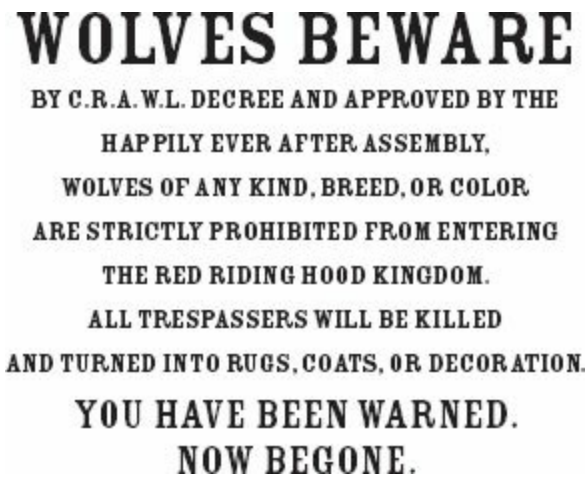
As everyone knows, the Red Riding Hood Kingdom is surrounded by a tall wall to keep out the wolves. There are guarded entrances into the kingdom along the perimeter of the wall.

"So we'll find the wall, find an entrance, and be inside the kingdom in no time," Alex said.

"What if they don't let us inside?" Conner asked.

"I can't imagine why they wouldn't let us in," Alex asked. "But if they don't, this time let me do the talking."

An hour or so of walking later, the twins could see the wall surrounding the kingdom in the distance. It was massive. It was thirty feet tall and made from enormous gray bricks. The same warning sign was posted on the wall every few feet or so:



"Wow," Conner said. "The wolves are definitely not getting in there."

They walked beside the wall for another couple of hours but never found an entrance. Alex reread the journal and found a part that she had missed.

There is a north entrance, a south entrance, an east entrance, and a west entrance. Each has its own path that goes to the center of the kingdom, where the town is. There is only one town in the Red Riding Hood Kingdom; the rest is farmland.

"Oh no," Alex said. "I misread the journal. Apparently there are only four entrances into the kingdom."

"And how close are we to one of them?" Conner asked. Alex looked closely at the map and her eyes widened a bit. Conner could tell it wasn't going to be good news.

"It looks like we're right in between the west entrance and the south entrance, which means—"

"More walking?" Conner said with a furrowed forehead and his hands on his hips.

"Yes…" Alex said, bearing the bad news. "About a day or two's worth."

Conner walked around in a circle, frustrated beyond belief.

"This is so annoying!" Conner yelled. "Why can't anything be easy?"

"Conner, everything's okay. It's just going to take a little longer to—"

"No, Alex, it's not okay!" Conner yelled. "We've been in this world for almost a week! I want to go home! I miss Mom! I miss my friends! I'm even starting to miss *Mrs. Peters*! There, I admitted it!"

Conner was so upset that he kicked a tree, but he ended up just hurting his foot.

"Ouch!" he yelled.

"I miss home, too, but there's nothing I can do about it!" Alex said. "We'll get home *when we get home*, and that's that. But in the meantime, it doesn't do us any good to be angry. We just have to get through it!"

Conner crossed his arms and his shoulders slumped. He was aggravated almost to tears. Alex assumed they were closer to the southern entrance, and led the way toward it. Conner verbalized his frustrations the entire way.

"I miss pavement and sidewalks," Conner ranted. "I miss our crappy rental house. I miss our neighborhood. I miss that dog down the street that barks constantly through the night. I miss homework. I miss getting detention for not doing homework."

"Let it out, Conner," Alex said. "You'll feel better."

"I hate this place," Conner continued. "I hate the dirt paths. I hate the man-eating witches. I hate the mutant-size wolves. I hate sleeping outside. I hate bridge trolls. I hate all the trees… wait, *that's it! The trees!*"

Conner searched their surroundings and ran ahead to a big tree next to the kingdom's wall.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked.

"I'm getting inside the kingdom! I'm going to climb this tree and hop over the wall!" Conner yelled back at her. He started climbing it at a very quick and determined pace.

"It's a thirty-foot drop on the other side at least!" Alex shouted at him.

"Come on, Alex!" Conner said and gestured for her to follow him.

"I'm not climbing that tree!" she said.

"You'll climb up Rapunzel's tower but a tree is out of the question?" he asked mockingly.

"And I shouldn't have done that! I agree!" she said, but was ignored.

Conner was almost at the top of the tree. Alex ran over to the tree and climbed a little ways after him.

"Conner, please come down from there! I'd rather travel slowly and safely than quickly and dangerously!" she said.

Conner stood up on the tallest branch of the tree. The top of the wall was just a few feet away.

"I'm gonna jump to the wall and see if I can spot a way down," Conner said.

"Conner! Don't be stupid! Climb down right now! You're going to hurt yourself!" Alex demanded.

"Wish me luck!" Conner said, and prepped himself for the jump. "One… two… *three*!" Conner jumped off the tree branch and soared toward the wall.

"No!" Alex yelled.

He had jumped a little too hard. He missed the wall by a few inches and flew over it headfirst.

"Allleeeexxxx!" Conner bellowed as he fell.

She heard a large *thump* from the other side, but she couldn't see anything.

"Conner!" Alex screamed. "Conner, are you all right? Conner, are you alive?" She was hysterical.

Alex clambered up the tree faster than any animal she had ever seen in a documentary.

"Conner, answer me!" she pleaded. "Can you hear me? Are you hurt?"

Alex heard laughter just as she reached the top of the tree. On the other side of the wall, she saw Conner lying safely on a big stack of hay.

"Hi, Alex!" Conner said with a big smile on his face.

"Conner! You scared me to death!" Alex shouted.

"I know! It was so entertaining!" Conner said. "Do you really think I would have jumped if I didn't see something to land on?"

"I'm glad you're alive, so I can kill you myself," Alex said.

"Jump over! It's a soft landing, I promise!" he said.

"Fine!" Alex said. She carefully tossed him her bag before jumping over the fence.

Conner was right: The landing was soft. They were covered in hay, and they brushed it off each other.

"Take a look at this place," Alex said as she and Conner journeyed into the Red Riding Hood Kingdom. They felt as if they had entered another dimension all over again.

There were rolling hills of farmland for as far as they could see. Cows and sheep were grazing across the fields. Shepherds with curved staffs and shepherdesses in large bonnets attended to the animals with their dogs.

"Everything's so peaceful here!" Alex said. "I feel like I'm in a nursery rhyme."

"They must be bored out of their minds," Conner said.

"I wonder whose land this is?" Alex said.

A few moments later, Alex got her answer. They passed a big, wooden sign stuck into the ground that said:

BO PEEP FAMILY FARMS

The scenery was so pleasant that the time went by fairly fast. After they'd traveled a while longer, the peaked and pointed rooftops of the town came into view. They couldn't see much while looking at it from the outskirts, but once they were in the center of it, the town came to life.

"How adorable!" Alex squealed at first sight of the town.

It was so dainty and picturesque that they felt like they were in a theme park. It was filled with tiny cottage homes and shops made of bricks or stone walls and hay roofs. A bell in the steeple of an old schoolhouse rang. Many staff-carrying men and bonnet-wearing women like the ones they had seen in the fields walked about the town pulling goats and sheep along with them.

Among the many stores and shops were the Henny Penny Bank, Jack Horner's Pie Shop, and the Pat-a-Cake Bakery. The Shoe Inn, just adjacent to the main town, was a boot of gigantic proportions turned into a working hotel.

In the very center of the town was a grassy park that hosted several memorials and monuments. Alex was doing mental backflips at the sight of each of them.

A small brick wall that stood by itself had a golden plaque on it that said:

Sir Humpty Dumpty's Wall
You Were a Good Egg and Shall Be Missed by More than Just the King's Horses and Men. Rest in Pieces

Just past Humpty Dumpty's wall was a small hill with a well on top of it. A sign pointing to the hill said:

JACK AND JILL HILL

In the middle of the park was a circular fountain. A statue of a young shepherd boy stood in the center of it and water poured from the mouths of the sheep that were under him. The carved dedication of the fountain read:

The twins were so enthralled by everything that they were getting strange looks from the villagers and townspeople.

"This place reminds me of that miniature golf course in town," Conner said. "Not the one by us, but the really legit one across town, where all the rich kids live."

At the edge of town, with the best view of the park, was Red Riding Hood's castle. The castle had four tall towers that could be seen from anywhere in town. It appropriately had red walls with dark red roofs. A moat circled the castle and had its own water mill.

The castle looked massive from far away. However, as the twins moved closer to it, they realized it wasn't very big at all; it was just built to *look* big. The moat around it was so small that one of the twins could have easily stepped over it.

"I bet you Red Riding Hood's basket is in there somewhere," Conner said.

Alex retrieved the journal from out of her bag and began reading the specifics of collecting the basket to Conner.

Unlike every other palace or castle, Red Riding Hood's isn't very difficult to break into. The castle was built so quickly after the C.R.A.W.L. Revolution that the builders forgot to add some basic necessities. The kitchen windows located in the back of the castle have no locks on them.

The Red Riding Hood Kingdom is the safest and smallest of all the kingdoms; therefore, they're shorthanded on soldiers and guards. The halls of the castle are only patrolled until midnight, and the guards don't return until dawn. Sneak into the castle between midnight and dawn through the kitchen windows, stay away from the main halls, and you should be fine.

Queen Red Riding Hood has a special room in her chambers devoted to all the baskets she's acquired and been given over the years. Find this room, and you'll find her very first basket, the one she took with her to her grandmother's house all those years ago.

You don't need to collect the whole basket, just a small chunk of the tree bark that surrounds the rim. It should be easy to identify, as there is already a chunk of tree bark missing from when I collected it.

"And I was just hoping we could ring the doorbell and ask for it," Conner said.

Alex looked up at all the towers and windows. She wondered which window belonged to the room they would find the basket in. And as she looked up at the castle, something else entirely caught her eye.

"Look over there!" Alex said, and pointed to the sky.

Conner turned to look in the direction she was pointing. Sticking straight up into the air a hundred feet or so was an enormous beanstalk.

"That must be Jack's beanstalk!" Alex said. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"No, but I'm sure you want to go see the beanstalk—" Conner said, and before he could finish, Alex had taken off toward it.

The twins ran through the town and had to take a trail leading out of town to get to the beanstalk. They passed a few cottage homes and more farmland as they traveled; it was much farther than they had thought. Eventually, they saw the base of the beanstalk ahead.

It was thick and curly and had huge leaves. It grew right next to an old, decrepit shack that was only large enough to have one room inside of it. A little ways behind the beanstalk and the shack was a large, elegant manor with yellow bricks and enough chimneys and windows to hold a dozen rooms.

"Which one of those is Jack's house?" Conner asked as they approached the beanstalk.

Alex looked at it for a moment until she figured it out.

"That shack must be where Jack lived with his mother when they were poor, and then after he defeated the giant and became rich, they must have built a new home just behind it!" she said happily. "They're both his!"

Conner shrugged. He had no reason to doubt her guess.

"Look how tall it is!" Alex said once they had reached the base of the beanstalk. "It would take a lot of bravery to climb that!"

Just then they heard a door slam, and a man came out of the manor. He was young and tall with short hair and broad shoulders. He was very good-looking, but he wore a subdued expression. He carried an axe and a log.

"Look, Alex!" Conner whispered. "Do you think that's Jack?"

"I don't know," she whispered back. "Let's ask him."

The man set the log on a chopping block in the front yard and began chopping the log into small pieces.

"Hi there!" said Alex, being extra friendly.

"Hello," said the man, never looking up from chopping.

"Are you Jack?" Conner asked him.

"Yup," the man said. "Do you need something?"

"No, we're just traveling around," Alex said. "We saw your beanstalk from all the way in town and wanted to get a closer look."

"Many people do," Jack said. "I have to chop it down once a week because it grows so fast."

His expression barely changed as he chopped the wood. Was he just accustomed to random people approaching his home and beanstalk, and he'd become numb to it?

"You have a lovely home," Alex said.

"Except for that eyesore in the front," Conner said, and nodded toward the shack behind him.

"Conner, be polite!" Alex said.

"I've turned it into a workshop," Jack told them. He finished chopping the wood, collected the pieces in his hands, went into the shack, and slammed the door behind him.

"Well, someone isn't much of a conversationalist," Conner said.

"I wonder what's wrong with him. He seems so different," Alex said.

"Have you met before?" Conner asked. Sometimes he wondered if she had forgotten that they were from another world.

"No, I just mean from the way he's always been described," Alex said. "He was always so energetic and adventurous. I wonder what's troubling him."

"Maybe he doesn't like people coming up to his house," said Conner. "If I were him, I'd get really annoyed, too—"

Conner had another sarcastic comment to add, but he was distracted by a high-pitched sound coming from inside the manor.

"Do you hear that?" Conner asked Alex. "It sounds like *singing*."

They both turned to face the manor as a set of window shutters were pushed open. The twins wouldn't have believed it if they hadn't been so close, but standing behind the open window was a golden woman.

She happily sang a soprano ballad as loudly as she could. A set of strings played along with her, but the twins couldn't see where the music was coming from.

"Oh, the day is here, and so am I,
To wistfully dream of birds that fly.
If I had legs, I'd see the world and travel away,
But I'm only a harp, and this window is where I shall stay."

She turned to face the twins as she sang the final note, and they noticed a set of strings connected to her back. The strings played magically along to her voice. She was a magic harp.

"Hello, children! I didn't see you there!" the harp said.

Alex jumped up and down. "Are you the magical harp?" she asked. "The one that Jack saved from the giant?"

"The one and only!" the harp said, and struck a dramatic pose. "And thank God he did, because giants have terrible taste in music! You wouldn't believe the numbers he used to force me to perform for him! All the lyrics were about eating sheep and stepping on villagers! Would you like me to sing for you?"

"No, thanks," Conner said.

The harp took offense to this.

"I remember that day like it was yesterday!" the harp said. "There I was, minding my own business, being a slave for the giant, when suddenly this skinny peasant boy walks by, and I was like, 'Hey there! Why don't you rescue me? I could use some rescuing!' The next thing I know, we're zooming down a beanstalk, being chased by the giant! Jack chopped down the beanstalk and the giant fell to his death! *Splat!* Right on the Bo Peep farms! It was quite a day!"

"How terrifying!" Alex said.

"It was the most excitement I had had in a hundred years! Everything worked out just wonderfully, though. Jack and his mother became rich, I wasn't a slave anymore, and the Bo Peep family said the giant was the best fertilizer their farms had ever used!"

"That's so wrong," Conner said to himself.

"What are you two doing here?" the harp asked them with a big smile.

Alex and Conner looked at each other, both afraid to answer.

"We're just visiting," Alex said. "We've never been to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom before."

"We were in town and saw the beanstalk and wanted to see it up close," Conner said.

"Then, welcome!" the harp said. "Don't you just love it here? I know I do! I've been around the world, and I've never felt more comfortable! It's so safe here! The people are all friendly farmers,

and the best part is, no wolves are allowed! Are you two thinking of moving? Wouldn't that be nice? I think you should move here and visit me every day!"

The harp was very chatty, and the twins could tell she was desperate for attention. Spending every day cooped in a house couldn't be easy.

"We're actually on our way home," Conner said. "We just have to make a stop at Red Riding Hood's castle, and then we'll be on our way. We've never been before—"

"You should have Jack take you!" the harp said. "He's headed there this afternoon to meet with Queen Red Riding Hood."

"He is?" Alex asked.

"Oh, yes," the harp said. "He visits her at the end of every week and brings her a handmade basket every time."

The harp looked side to side to make sure no one else was listening, but there was no one in sight.

"Now, you didn't hear this from me," the harp said excitedly, with gossip in her eyes. "Queen Red Riding Hood calls him to the castle every week and proposes to him! Poor thing has been in love with him since they were kids!"

"Really?" Alex said. "Does that mean they're getting married?"

"Oh, heavens no," the harp said. "Jack can't stand her! He turns her down every time."

"Why would he do that? Doesn't he want to be king?" Conner asked.

"His heart belongs to someone else," the harp said sadly, and the strings on her back played a sad chord.

"Who does he love?" Alex asked.

"Let me guess," Conner said. "Little Miss Muffet?"

"Of course not," the harp said. "Miss Muffet married Georgie Porgie but, as everyone knows, he has had countless affairs, but that's another story—"

"Back to Jack," Alex said.

"Oh, right. Well, I'm not sure who he's in love with. I've never seen her," the harp said. "All I know is, he's never been the same since she moved away."

Alex and Conner looked at each other with the same questioning expression. Who could it be? Was that the reason he had seemed so gloomy?

The door of the shack opened, and Jack emerged with a basket made from the pieces of wood he had just chopped.

"Hey, Jack, I have a wonderful idea!" the harp called out. "Why don't you take these two with you to the castle? They've never been inside it before!"

Jack seemed hesitant.

"Please, Mr. Jack!" Alex pleaded. "We won't be any trouble!"

"Come on, Jack! Make their day!" the harp pleaded.

"All right," Jack said.

Jack turned and began traveling toward the town. The twins ran after him.

"Thanks so much," Alex called back to the harp.

"You're welcome!" the harp said. "Come back and visit me… *please*!"

Jack was a very fast walker. His legs were much longer than the twins', so they found it difficult to keep up with him.

"It's very kind of you to let us tag along," Alex said to Jack, but he never looked up from the

ground.

"You're not much of a talker, are you?" Conner said.

"I don't have much to say," Jack said.

Conner nodded at him; he understood completely. As they neared the town, Alex pulled Conner aside.

"How lucky is this?" she said. "If we get inside the castle and get ahold of the basket, we'll be out of this kingdom in no time!"

They traveled into the town and reached the castle. There was a set of large, wooden doors at the castle's entrance. Jack knocked on the door. A moment later, a small window in the middle of the door opened and a set of eyes appeared.

"Who goes there?" said a voice on the other side of the doors.

"It's Jack," Jack said. "Again."

"Who is that behind you?" the voice demanded, and the eyes looked over Jack's shoulder to Alex and Conner. They awkwardly waved.

"Oh… what are your names again?" Jack asked the twins.

"Alex and Conner," Alex told him, and gave him a thumbs-up.

"These are my friends, Alex and Conner. They're accompanying me to the castle today," Jack said.

The doors opened, and the twins followed Jack into the castle.

It felt like a condensed version of Cinderella's palace. The halls weren't quite as long, and the furniture wasn't quite as nice. There were many portraits hung on the walls, but they all were of Queen Red Riding Hood at various ages in different poses, each one more grand than the last.

The twins waited with Jack in a hall outside another set of doors. Jack knocked on the doors and immediately took a seat on a bench outside them.

"This always takes a moment," Jack said.

A series of footsteps and sounds of rushing about came from the other side of the doors.

"Wait, don't open the door. I'm not ready yet!" someone whispered. *"Hand me that cape! No, not that one, the other one, with the hood! Hurry!"*

Jack began to whistle as he waited.

"How do I look? What about my dress, does it seem all right to you?" the whispers continued. *"All right, I'm ready. Let him in! Quickly!"*

Jack stood up just as the doors were opened by a pink-faced and out-of-breath handmaiden. She escorted Jack inside, and the twins followed.

They entered a long room with tall windows on both sides. The walls were covered in more portraits of the queen. Looking up from the floor was a giant wolf head with red eyes and a set of sharp teeth. It looked just like one of the wolves the twins had seen in the Dwarf Forests, and it alarmed them at first, before they discovered it was just a wolf-skin rug spread out on the floor. The twins knew without asking that the rug must have been the Big Bad Wolf himself at one point.

At the very end of the room, perched elegantly—almost *too* elegantly—on a large throne was Queen Red Riding Hood.

"Hello, Jack!" Red Riding Hood said.

Red Riding Hood was a very pretty young woman around the same age as Jack. She had bright blue eyes and blonde hair that was done up glamorously behind her crown. She wore a long, red gown with a matching hooded cape and a pink corset. She wore a necklace with a massive diamond,

her shoulders were completely bare, and she wore a pair of long gloves with a dozen sparkly rings on her fingers.

She was showing too much skin, wearing too much makeup, and was dressed too well for the middle of the day.

"Hello, Red," Jack said.

"What a surprise! I wasn't even expecting you!" she said.

"Uh-huh," Jack said.

"And I see you brought… *guests*?" Red asked. She was not happy to see that she and Jack were not alone.

"Yes, this is Alex and Conner," Jack said.

"Hello!" Alex said bashfully.

"What's up, Red?" Conner said, and was then elbowed by his sister.

"Helloooo," Red said behind a clenched and very fake smile. "Welcome to my castle. Please have a seat."

Red clapped her hands, and two servants placed a large, cushy chair right next to her throne for Jack to sit on. They brought Alex and Conner each a small stool to sit on some distance away from Red and Jack.

Jack moved the chair back away from the throne a couple feet before sitting on it. He handed Red the basket he had made for her.

"Is this for me?" Red asked him. "Oh, how thoughtful of you! You are just too sweet for words! I'll cherish it!"

"You always do," Jack said.

"So, tell me, what's new with you?" Red asked Jack. She was leaning toward him as far as she possibly could without falling off of her throne.

"Nothing much," Jack said. "Same old, same old." His body language made it obvious that he was ready to leave from the minute he'd sat down. "How's the kingdom?"

"Oh, I never bother myself with all that talk of economy and security and peasant needs and blah blah blah," Red said. "My granny takes care of all that for me. She's much better at it than I would be, anyway."

Red got tired of holding the basket. She snapped her fingers, and her handmaiden collected the basket from her.

"Put it with the others," Red instructed.

The handmaiden collected it from her and headed out of the room. The twins figured this was their chance.

"May we see the others?" Alex asked.

"The others?" Red asked.

"The other baskets," Alex said. Red was looking at her peculiarly. "My brother loves baskets."

Conner nodded, going along with it.

"I do! They're my most favorite thing ever!" Conner said. "You know what they say, life is better with baskets!"

Red was staring at them as if they were the strangest people she had ever met in her life.

"If you wish," she said, and shooed them off.

Alex and Conner jumped up and followed the handmaiden out of the room and down a hall.

“Where does Queen Red Riding Hood keep all of her baskets?” Alex asked the handmaiden, and then winked at Conner. She wasn’t very good at playing dumb.

“She has a chamber dedicated entirely to baskets,” the handmaiden said.

“So, she has a basket room?” Conner asked.

“Yes, and if you received as many as she did a year, you would, too,” the handmaiden said.

“How many are we talking about?” Conner asked.

“You’ll see,” she said.

The handmaiden opened a door, and the three of them walked inside. The room was twice the size of the room they had just been in and was filled from floor to ceiling with thousands and thousands of baskets.

Some were on shelves, some were stacked neatly, and others were just piled around the room. The handmaiden tossed the basket from Jack in a pile on one side of the room.

“The queen gets them for birthdays, holidays, and any special occasion,” the handmaiden said. “Some are from villagers, some from friends, others are from the monarchs of neighboring kingdoms.”

Alex and Conner stared around the room with their mouths open. How would they ever find the basket they were looking for in all of this?

“Do you mind if we have a look around?” Alex managed to say through her shock.

“I suppose,” the handmaiden said. She looked at the twins curiously and then left them inside the basket room.

The twins could barely breathe. They both felt as if a dumbbell had suddenly been tied to their chests.

“I have never felt so overwhelmed in my life!” Conner declared. “This is like trying to do the whole summer break packet of homework the day before school starts again, but a thousand times worse. How are we going to look through all of these?”

“It’s not that bad….” Alex tried convincing him, but she didn’t even convince herself. “We just need to start. You take one side, and I’ll take the other. Let’s do this.”

They split and rapidly began looking through the piles and piles of baskets for the one with the bark rim. They knew they didn’t have much time and grew more anxious after each second.

They had no idea there could be so many shapes and sizes and designs for baskets. Like snowflakes, each one was different from the next.

Alex was paranoid that she had missed it. Conner kept getting splinters and kept shouting *“Ah!”* every time it happened.

They had been there for almost an hour and still hadn’t covered even a fourth of the room. They were making a huge mess. The room was twice as disorganized now as it had been when they’d entered it. Even Alex wasn’t hesitating, throwing around baskets that she had already examined.

“This is impossible!” Conner yelled, kicking a pile of baskets.

Just as he kicked the pile, the door swung open and the handmaiden returned. Alex and Conner froze. She was appalled by the chaos they had caused.

“I don’t know what on earth you’re doing, but I think it’s time for you two to leave,” she said.

The handmaiden escorted them back to the throne room. This time, she watched them like a hawk as they sat on their stools.

Queen Red Riding Hood was literally hanging off her throne and grabbing hold of Jack’s chair as

she talked to him. The twins had never seen Jack look so bored and lifeless. Neither of them had noticed the twins return.

"You know, Jack," Red said, circling his forearm with her finger. "The Red Riding Hood Kingdom isn't much of a *kingdom* without a *king*.…"

"Perhaps you should change the name to the Red Riding Hood Queendom," Jack said.

Red laughed much harder than she should have. "You're so funny! But that's not what I meant. What I'm trying to tell you, Jack, is that I've never been more ready to get married. If *someone* asked me for my hand in marriage today, I would say yes! Do you know *anyone* who might be interested in marrying me? In being king? *Anyone?*"

A white dove suddenly flew by one of the windows outside and sat on the window ledge. As soon as Jack saw it, his entire face lit up. His eyes grew wide, and he smiled; for once, he looked happy.

He turned to Red. Clearly she wasn't used to seeing him like this, either. The twins could practically see her heart beating out of her chest as excitement filled her body. Was he going to propose? Was this the moment she had been waiting for for so long?

"Red," Jack said.

"Yes, Jack?" Red said.

"I have to go," Jack said, jumping up and heading out of the throne room. Red almost fell off of her throne.

"Go?" she said. "Go where?"

"Home," Jack called out, not even looking back at her. "I'll see you next week."

Red crossed her arms and pouted. He was the only thing preventing her from having *everything*.

The twins felt it was best to leave with Jack, so they followed him out of the castle.

"It was wonderful meeting you, Alex, Conner," Jack said, and shook their hands.

"Likewise," Alex said. "Thanks again for taking us to the castle."

"My pleasure! I hope to run into you someday soon," Jack said, and then headed in the direction of his home with a new bounce in his step.

It was very strange. Jack was now acting like the person Alex had always thought he would be.

"What is that guy's deal? How does someone go from a zombie to a camp counselor in a matter of seconds?" Conner said.

"I don't know," Alex said, looking after him as he walked away. "He's a very odd man."

"Looks like we'll be sneaking into the castle after all," Conner said, and slumped to a seated position on the ground.

"At least we know what to expect tonight, and we already went through a good portion of the baskets," Alex said. "We just have to wait until midnight."

"And in the meantime, I could really use a nap," Conner said.

The twins traveled up the street and booked a room at the Shoe Inn. Their room had a perfect view of Red Riding Hood's castle. It was somewhere near the shoe's tongue, because a set of laces crossed through one of their walls. The room also had a working bathtub, and they both took turns using it, since they hadn't been able to bathe in so long.

"That was the best bath I think I'll ever have," Conner said.

They both decided to rest for a little bit, and as soon as their bodies touched the bed, they both fell into a deep sleep. They slept for a few hours and woke up shortly before midnight.

"What's our game plan for tonight?" Conner said. "It'll be the first time we'll ever be breaking

and entering anywhere, so I'm extra anxious."

"Let's take account of everything we have now," Alex said, and dumped all the contents of their bags onto the bed.

"We have two blankets, a bag of gold coins, a dagger, a lock of Rapunzel's hair, a glass slipper, a map, a journal, and a satchel of food," Alex listed. "We can use the dagger to cut a chunk of wood out of the basket, but it's going to be dark. We'll need some light."

"Let's take these lanterns," Conner said, and gathered lanterns that were on the bed sides.

"Great," Alex said. "We should plan on leaving the kingdom right after, just in case we run into some trouble. We'll head to the east entrance of the kingdom, and that'll bring us close to the border of the Fairy Kingdom."

Conner lowered his head. "I was so looking forward to coming back to this bed."

At a quarter to midnight, Alex and Conner gathered all their things, lit their lanterns, and left the Shoe Inn. They walked across town to the castle. It was so quiet at night; not even farm animals were up this late.

They hid behind Humpty Dumpty's wall and watched through the castle windows as guards patrolled the halls.

"Just a few more minutes and they'll leave," Alex said.

A few minutes later, they saw fewer and fewer guards walk past the windows.

"Are they gone?" Conner asked.

"They must be!" Alex said. "Let's go."

They ran around to the back of the castle and saw a large kitchen through a set of windows. They hopped across the moat—they knew they'd be able to!—and pulled at the window. Like the journal had said, it didn't have a lock, and it opened easily.

Alex crawled into the kitchen first. She was as quiet as possible; the only sound she made came from the intense beats of her heart. Conner climbed in after and knocked over a stack of pots and pans.

Alex was mortified. "I'm going to kill you!" she mouthed at him.

"Sorry!" he mouthed back at her.

They waited for a moment to see if anyone had heard the disturbance, but no one had.

The twins left the kitchen and found themselves in a hallway with, to no surprise, more portraits of Red Riding Hood.

"That Red Riding Hood sure loves having her portrait painted," Conner said.

"Maybe there are so many paintings of her because she's the first monarch the kingdom has ever had. It doesn't have the history the Charming Kingdom has," Alex said.

"Or she's just a self-obsessed twit," Conner said.

They traveled down the hall, then another one, then up a set of stairs and down another hall.

"Do you know where you're going?" Conner asked.

"I thought I was following you!" Alex said.

"What? Since when do you follow me?" Conner said.

A shadow was creeping toward them from down the hall. As it got closer, they could see it was the silhouette of a guard.

"A guard!" Alex whispered, and pointed at the shadow. They ran down the hall and entered the first room they found.

The room was pitch-black.

"Where are we now?" Conner asked.

"Why are you asking me questions you know I don't have the answers to?" Alex said.

Alex waited by the door and listened for the guard to pass by. Conner moved around the room with his hands stretched out in the darkness so he wouldn't bump into anything.

Their eyes began to adjust to the darkness.

"Alex, I think I can see something—" Conner walked right into what he thought was a doorway and suddenly saw a pale face staring back at him. He fell to the floor with fear. He screamed as quietly as he could.

"Alex! There's someone standing over there in the doorway! He's so creepy and ugly!" Conner said, pointing up.

Alex ran to his side and squinted her eyes to see what he was talking about.

"That's not a doorway; that's a mirror, you idiot!" Alex said.

"Oh," Conner said, and Alex helped him up to his feet.

"Oh my, what big claws you have," said a voice behind Alex and Conner, causing them both to jump five feet into the air.

They turned to see an enormous four-poster bed with silky red sheets and lacy white curtains around it. In the bed, talking in her sleep, was Queen Red Riding Hood.

"We're in the queen's bedroom!" Conner whispered to Alex.

"Oh my, what a big nose you have, Grandma," Red said, still very much asleep.

"Is she having a nightmare?" Conner asked.

"Oh my, what big sharp teeth you have—*Wooolf*!" Red screamed, and sat straight up in her bed, awake. Alex and Conner dropped to the floor, out of her view.

She was out of breath, and beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. She finally caught her breath. "Not again," she said, and then, frustrated, laid back down to sleep.

Alex and Conner were afraid to move.

"Did she go back to sleep yet?" Conner asked.

"How are we supposed to tell?" Alex asked.

"Oh my, what big strong arms you have, Jack," Red said.

"I'm guessing she's asleep," Conner said, and confidently stood.

"Oh my, what soft lips you have, Jack," Red said.

"Let's get out of here before we hear her describe anything else!" Conner said.

They emerged back into the hall and traveled around the castle for a while longer. All the halls looked so familiar, it seemed impossible to find the basket room. Every time they thought they had found the right door, they found themselves in a drawing room or a dining room or a ballroom.

"Let's find the entrance and retrace our steps to the throne room—" Alex began, but Conner interrupted her.

"No need. The baskets are in there," he said, and pointed to a door beside them.

"How do you know?" Alex asked him.

"Because I remember that portrait of Red being next to the basket room," Conner said, and pointed to a portrait where Red Riding Hood was barely clothed, with only a wolf-skin coat to cover her.

Alex gave Conner a really dirty look.

"What?" Conner asked with a smirk. "It's memorable."

They pushed the door open and found the room they had spent the entire afternoon in earlier.

"Let's take it from where we left off," Alex said. She and Conner split up and headed to the areas they had last searched.

It had been hard during the day, but it was even harder at night, since they had only the light from their lanterns to go by. After a few hours of searching, their anxiety levels were as high as Jack's beanstalk.

Suddenly, the twins heard a loud *clank!*

"What was that?" Alex said.

"Alex, look up there!" Conner said, pointing to a window. On the window ledge was a shiny X-shaped object.

"What is that?" Alex asked.

"It's a grappling hook!" Conner said. It jerked slightly in a consistent pattern. "I think someone's climbing up! *Hide!*"

They left their lanterns on the ground and dove behind a pile of baskets.

A moment later, a figure appeared on the window ledge. It took out a sharp knife and cut out a large circle in the window and then quietly crawled into the room. It was a woman who the twins had never seen before. Her clothing was made out of plant leaves sewn together, and her hair was a shade of red so dark it almost seemed purple.

The woman scanned the room and looked cautiously at the two lanterns. Did she know the twins were in there? Like an animal, the woman began sniffing around the room. She searched through the baskets as she sniffed, discarding some by tossing them behind her.

She went around the room, using her nose as her guide, until finally she locked in on one direction. She climbed on top of a pile of baskets to reach the top of a shelf. She reached her hand to the back of the shelf and pulled out a basket. It had a rim made of tree bark.

Alex and Conner looked at each other. *There it is!*

The woman carved a big chunk of bark out of the basket and then tucked it safely into her belt. She put the basket back on the shelf and climbed down the pile of baskets and headed for the window.

She was just about to climb through the window when she heard an *"Ah!"* come from the other side of the room. Conner had given himself another splinter from hiding behind the baskets.

"Conner!" Alex mouthed.

"Sorry!" he mouthed back.

The woman walked toward where they were hiding. She squinted in their direction for a moment. Alex and Conner were both too frightened even to breathe. They knew she knew they were there. What was she going to do to them?

The woman looked to the ground at one of their lanterns, and a coy smile appeared on her face. She kicked it into a pile of baskets and disappeared through the window and back down the rope connected to the grappling hook.

"That was a close one!" Conner said. "Good thing she didn't find us, or we'd be in some—"

"*Conner!* Look!" Alex said. The pile of baskets the woman had kicked the lantern into was on fire.

"Oh boy," Conner said. "We've got to get out of here."

"Not until I get a piece of that basket," Alex said. She reached into her bag and pulled out the dagger. She ran up the pile of baskets to the top of the shelf just as she had seen the woman do. She

wasn't as tall as the woman, so she had to reach farther to get it.

"Alex, hurry!" Conner said. The fire was growing and spreading around the room to the different piles and stacks of baskets. He tried blowing the fire out, but it didn't work. These were large flames, not birthday candles.

Alex had to climb up onto the shelf to reach the basket, but she finally wrapped her fingers around it.

"Gotcha!" Alex said, pulling it out. The bark around the rim had two chunks missing, one from whoever had written the journal, and the other from whoever that woman was. Alex sank her dagger into the basket and began cutting out a piece of it.

"Alex! Unless you want to leave this place extra crispy, I suggest you hurry!" Conner yelled. Half of the room was ablaze. It was becoming unbearably hot inside the room. Dark smoke was filling the air, making it hard to breathe.

"I got it," Alex said, and made her way down to Conner.

The flames had covered the door they'd entered from.

"How do we get out of here?" Alex yelled.

The sound of running footsteps came from the hall outside the door. Through the flames, the twins could see the faces of several alarmed guards.

"Fire! Fire in the castle!" a guard yelled. *"Get the queen to safety! Get some water!"*

Another guard pointed directly at the twins. *"You two! Stay where you are!"*

"Not likely!" Conner yelled. He picked up a particularly heavy basket and threw it at a window, causing it to shatter. He grabbed his sister's hand and pulled her toward it. They breathed in the fresh air from outside.

"Look, the water mill is right below us!" Conner said, and started climbing out of the window and down toward it. He helped his sister out of the window, and they climbed down the watermill together. Halfway down, flames burst through all the windows in the basket room; the entire room was an inferno.

The water mill began to turn from the twins' weight, and they fell straight into the moat, which wouldn't have been such a rough landing if the moat had been deeper than three feet.

The twins clambered out of the moat and began running as fast as they could away from the castle. No guards or soldiers were chasing them. They all must have been inside the castle trying to put out the fire.

Alex and Conner ran out of the town and were on their way toward the eastern gate of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom in a matter of minutes. They only looked back once and saw that almost half of the castle was now on fire. A thick trail of smoke filled the sky.

"Was that the fourth or fifth time we've narrowly escaped death this week?" Conner asked.

"Who was that woman?" Alex asked. "And why was she looking for the basket, too?"

"Thank God she found it, otherwise we might never have," Conner said.

The most worrisome thought came to Alex's mind. "Conner, you don't think someone *else* is collecting items for the Wishing Spell, do you?"

He had to think about it, but she could see it was just as troubling for him to consider it as it was for her.

"I doubt it," Conner said. "Think about all the trouble the man who wrote the journal went through to learn about it. I'd be shocked if someone else knew anything about it."

Alex nodded. They both knew it was very unlikely, but the possibility still lingered in their heads.

A few hours later, the twins could see the eastern gate of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom wall in the distance. The guards must have extinguished the fire in the castle, because there was no more smoke filling the air.

The night sky was at its darkest just before dawn. As they reached the gate, they could see something moving near it. Spooked from the events earlier, Alex and Conner dove behind a bush and watched from afar.

It was a man pacing near the gate. He was tall and seemed young. There was something oddly familiar about him.

"Is that Jack?" Alex asked.

Conner took a closer look. "It is! What is he doing all the way out here?"

Suddenly, a hooded figure came into view on the other side of the gate.

"Who is *that*?" Conner asked.

Jack carefully approached the gate. There was so much tension between him and whoever was on the other side of the gate that even the twins could feel it. He had been waiting for whoever it was all night.

"Hello, Jack," said the hooded figure.

"Hello, Goldie," he said.

And then the twins realized who it was: Goldilocks. She was wearing the dark maroon coat they had seen her wear in the Dwarf Forests.

"How do they know each other?" Alex asked.

Conner shook his head. "No idea."

"I saw your dove," Jack said. "I knew you must have sent it."

"I did," Goldilocks said. "I knew you would recognize it. Doves are hard to train these days."

The twins could tell from the way they were standing that Goldilocks and Jack had much to say to each other, but they said very little. Instead, they just stared into each other's eyes with their bodies pressed against the bars between them.

"I hate these bars between us," Jack said.

"It's either the bars of this gate or the bars of a prison cell, I'm afraid," Goldilocks said.

"I worry about you constantly," Jack said.

"I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself," Goldilocks said.

"I wish you would let me come with you," Jack said. "You know I'd pack my things and leave right now if you would let me."

"No sense in ruining two lives," Goldilocks said. "You'll find someone else someday."

"You've been saying that since you left, yet here I am, year after year, meeting you in the shadows," Jack said.

"She's the one he's in love with!" Alex said, putting the pieces together. "She's the reason Jack won't marry Red Riding Hood. She's the girl the harp was telling us about."

"Oh," Conner said. "This is like a soap opera!"

Jack placed his hands over Goldilocks's hands.

"I swear, if I ever find the person who wrote you that letter, I'll kill them," Jack said. "They're the reason for this whole mess."

"What is done is done, and it can never be undone," Goldilocks said. She and Jack were touching

foreheads through the bars.

"One day, I'll clear your name," Jack said. "I promise. And then we can be together."

"Clear my name?" Goldilocks said, and backed away from him. "I'm a fugitive, Jack! I steal! I run! I even kill when I have to! No one can clear me of that; it's who I am. It's what I've become."

"It didn't start off as your fault, and you know it," Jack said.

Goldilocks grew silent.

"I love you," Jack said. "And I know you love me. You don't have to say it back. I just know."

"I'm a criminal, and you're a hero," Goldilocks said with teary eyes. "A flame may love a snowflake, but they can never be together without each harming the other."

"Then let me melt," Jack said. He reached through the gate and pulled Goldilocks close to him, and they kissed. It was passionate, pure, and long overdue.

Alex became misty-eyed. Conner scrunched up his face as if he'd smelled something foul.

"Good thing those bars are between them," Conner said.

"Shut up, Conner," Alex said.

Goldilocks pushed herself away from Jack.

"I have to go," she said. "I have to be as far away from this place as I can get by sunrise."

"Let me come with you," Jack begged.

"No," Goldilocks said.

"When will I see you next? A week? A month? A year?" he asked.

Porridge walked up behind Goldilocks. She leaped up onto the horse's back and took hold of the reins.

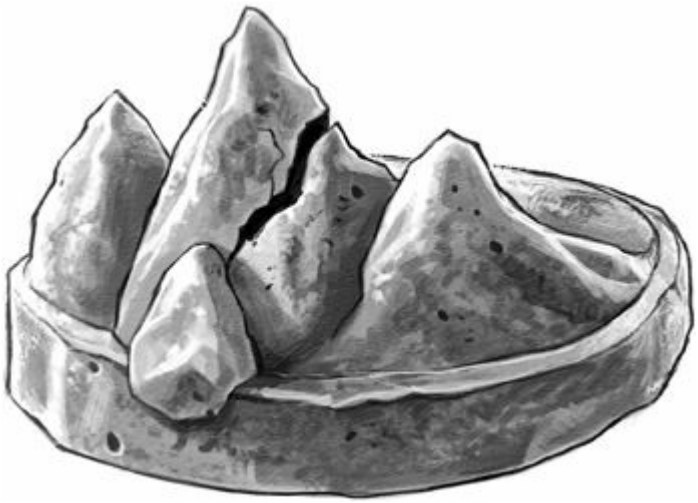
"Just wait for the dove," she said, and rode off into the night on her cream-colored horse.

Jack watched her until she wasn't visible anymore. Suddenly, all the life in his body faded away, and he once again became the sad man the twins had met earlier. He sadly turned away from the gate and slowly headed home.

"I guess not every fairy-tale character gets a happily-ever-after," Alex said.

Alex and Conner ran up to the gate. It was locked, so they had to climb over it, finally making their way out of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom just as the sun started to rise.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



THE TROLL AND GOBLIN TERRITORY

Alex and Conner were lost.

"We're not lost. I just don't know exactly where we are," Alex told her brother.

"So, in other words, we're *lost*," Conner said.

"All right, Conner, we're lost!" Alex said, and hit him with the map.

They had left the Red Riding Hood Kingdom in such a hurry, they thought they might have taken a wrong path. Alex kept looking down at the map, trying to see where they had made a wrong turn, and kept walking into bushes and trees.

"We could be in the Fairy Kingdom, or perhaps we're back in the Charming Kingdom," she said. "But the eastern gate of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom is close to so many borders, we could be in the Sleeping Kingdom, for all I know."

"How is anyone supposed to find their way around this place? It's all just a bunch of trees and dirt roads with the occasional castle!" Conner said angrily. "We're never going to get home!"

"It's just a slight setback. We'll be back on track before you know it," Alex said.

"And exactly what track are we on?" Conner asked. "I hate to bring this to your attention, but we've only collected three of the eight Wishing Spell items, and we have no idea what two of them are. And, to be frank, we're not even sure if the Wishing Spell will work when and if we do collect everything."

"Don't be so negative, Conner," Alex said.

"Alex, I'm just being realistic," Conner said. "We still have so many places to go, and so much more ground to cover. And after seeing that weird jungle woman in Red Riding Hood's castle take a chunk of the basket, we may not be the only ones going after this Wishing Spell thing. What if we don't succeed? Have you thought about what we'll do if we get stuck here?"

She hadn't thought about it and didn't want to. She was afraid that thinking about it made it much more possible.

Alex inspected the map further, tracing it with her index finger.

"All right, I think I figured out what we did wrong," Alex said.

"*We?* You've been hogging the map since we got it," Conner said.

"All right, I think I figured out what *I* did wrong," Alex said, her cheeks reddening. "The path we should have taken is just on the other side of the forest next to us. We'll walk through the forest, get on the correct path, and then be on our way into the Fairy Kingdom."

"Great," Conner said.

They walked off the path and into the forest beside them. After walking for a while, they noticed that the forest was very still and eerily quiet—too quiet, especially for Conner. He'd had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach since they'd entered the forest.

The trees grew taller here, but whenever the twins looked up, there were no birds or bugs or anything to be seen gliding from tree to tree. The whole forest, excluding the trees, seemed lifeless.

"Hey, Alex?" Conner asked.

"Yes, Conner?" Alex said.

"Have you noticed we haven't seen any animals or birds for a while?" he said.

"No, I haven't; I've been a little preoccupied," Alex said, still looking down at the map.

"I'm just saying, don't you think it's kind of strange we're the only—*aaaaah!*"

Without warning, the twins were jerked suddenly upward and suspended in the air. They were dangling above the ground in some sort of roped net. They had walked right into a trap.

"What's going on?" Alex yelled. "What is this?"

"It's some kind of trap!" Conner said.

"Help!" Alex screamed. "Somebody help us!"

Unfortunately for them, their cries were heard by the wrong people. Two figures ran through the forest straight toward them. One was tall and lean, the other was short and round.

"Egghorn, we caught something!" said the low, growly voice of the smaller.

"It's about time!" said the high-pitched, raspy voice of the taller.

They came close, and the twins could make out the frightening faces of a goblin and a troll standing before them. The goblin was gangly and thin with big, yellow eyes and pea-green skin. The troll was fat and frumpy with a huge nose and horns. Both had big, pointy ears that stuck out on the sides of their heads.

"Let us go!" Conner demanded.

"You can't do this!" Alex yelled.

The goblin and troll paid no attention to what Alex and Conner were saying. They stared at the twins like insects in a jar.

"Ooooh, look how young they are, Bobblewart!" the goblin said.

"Plenty of time to serve!" the troll said.

"What do you mean *serve*?" Conner said. "You'd better not hurt us!"

"Let us out of this net right now, or I'll report you to the local authorities," Alex said, not knowing whom she could be referring to.

"And they'll grow bigger and stronger every day!" the troll said.

"Bobblewart, get the cart!" the goblin instructed. "They're going to make the perfect slaves."

The twins struggled twice as hard against the net when they heard the word *slaves*. They remembered what Froggy had told them over tea. The trolls and goblins had been banished for kidnapping and enslaving innocent people… and now Alex and Conner were living proof that it was still happening. How were they going to escape this?

Bobblewart, the troll, ran off and returned a moment later driving a small cart pulled by a frail donkey. Egghorn, the goblin, cut a rope above the net, and the twins fell hard into the cart. They continued to fight against the restraints of the net, but it was no use.

Egghorn climbed aboard the cart and sat next to Bobblewart. They both took the reins and whipped the donkey belligerently until the cart reached full speed.

They traveled for the rest of the day. All the twins could see through the net were treetops and sky zipping past them.

"Alex, what are we going to do?" Conner asked, still fighting against the ropes of the net.

"I don't know," Alex said. She was trembling like a small dog.

Alex managed to squirm her way to a seated position under the net to see where the troll and goblin were taking them. They were headed straight toward a line of boulders the size of mountains. Alex gasped; she recognized the rock formation from the map.

"What is it? What do you see?" Conner asked her.

“They’re taking us into the Troll and Goblin Territory,” Alex said, completely white-faced. “I can see the boulders that surround it!”

They remembered Froggy telling them the boulders had been placed around the territory to keep the trolls and goblins inside, but, clearly, as the cart squeezed through a crack between two of the boulders, the inhabitants had found ways around their imprisonment.

The cart went through the boulders and into the kingdom, but there was nothing to see. There were no trees or buildings or life of any kind. For miles around them, the land was only littered with piles of rubble and broken bits of stone.

“I don’t understand,” Conner said. “Where do they live?”

“This looks like a medieval junkyard,” Alex said.

The cart went through a gigantic hole in the ground and traveled down, deep into the earth. It was pitch-black, and the twins could barely see their hands in front of their faces. The smell of mildew and decay was horrible.

“The whole kingdom must be underground!” Alex said.

After descending in the dark for quite a distance, they saw tiny lights ahead of them. They came from lanterns scattered around a group of humans digging tunnels.

“What are people doing down here?” Conner asked, and then saw the trolls and goblins behind them.

“Faster!” the trolls and goblins demanded, whipping the humans.

Alex had to cover her eyes at the sight of it. “They must be slaves! Oh, Conner, this is horrible! This is so horrible!” she said.

Conner hugged his sister, and she cried into his shoulder.

“It’s okay, Alex. We’ll find a way out of this,” Conner said, but even he was scared.

There were hundreds of huts and small homes stacked on top of one another all around them. It was an enormous underground world.

“This place must be like one giant ant colony,” Conner said.

The cart moved through a stone arch with large statues, one of a goblin and one of a troll, on either side of it. They were frightening, with harsh features, and they were anything but welcoming. A sign carved into the arch read:

BE TROLL, BE GOBLIN, OR BE AFRAID

“Most people just have welcome mats,” Conner said.

Past the arch was a long tunnel constructed of stones. The cart traveled through the arch and a light could be seen at the end of the tunnel. There was much noise coming from the end of the tunnel, a combination of high-pitched laughter, rumbling conversation, and loud clanking.

The twins were soon driven into a massive common room with hundreds of goblins and trolls spread everywhere on numerous levels. Some were even hanging from a chandelier.

Everything was made of stone; they ate and drank from stone plates and goblets and sat on stone chairs at stone tables. They were served by other enslaved men and women. Each troll and goblin behaved in a more vulgar way than the last.

In the center of the chaos, on a platform overlooking the room, were two thrones. The Troll King sat in one and the Goblin King sat in the other. A crown made of rock was on display directly between them, just above their heads, demonstrating that they equally shared power over the kingdom.

They watched over their citizens with crude smirks, enjoying the festivities around them.

As the cart went through the room, many of the trolls and goblins hooted and hollered at the twins; some threw bits of food at them. Alex and Conner held on to each other tighter than ever, both trembling with fear.

The goblins and trolls were all grotesque and dreadful. They had warts and sharp teeth and horrible hygiene. They were the type of monsters Alex and Conner used to have nightmares about when they were younger.

Sitting on the kings' platform was a little troll girl about the twins' age. She had a round face with a small snout, and her hair was worn in pigtails just below tiny horns. She was sitting with her head resting on her hands and seemed bored and lonely; she didn't appear at all interested in the activities around her. She looked up as the twins passed her and gasped when she saw Conner.

This took him by surprise. "What is she looking at?" Conner asked. "Do you think she wants to eat me or something?"

The cart turned a corner and descended down another long tunnel. They were so deep underground that they wondered if they would ever make it back to the surface.

The cart entered a small and dim dungeon with a row of cells in it. Other slaves were imprisoned inside the cells: men, women, children, and elderly alike. They all looked exhausted and were ghostly pale. They were all silent and cowered at the sight of Egghorn and Bobblewart steering the cart into the room.

Egghorn and Bobblewart cut the net around Alex and Conner, yanked the bags out of their hands, and aggressively forced them inside a cell.

"Get in there!" Egghorn said, and slammed the cell door shut behind them.

"What do we have in here?" Bobblewart said. He took the twins' bags to a table on the side of the room and dumped all their belongings out onto it.

"Stay out of there!" Alex said as she watched helplessly. There for the entire room to see was the glass slipper, the lock of hair, the chunk of basket, the map, the journal, the dagger, their sack of gold coins, and everything else the twins had been carrying.

Thankfully, the troll and goblin only seemed interested in the dagger and the sack of gold coins. They took those with them and dumped everything else in a pile of waste on the side of the table.

"Rest up! You'll have a long day tomorrow!" Bobblewart said, and then shared a laugh with Egghorn and left the room with their cart.

All the other slaves stared at Alex and Conner through their cell bars. They had sympathy in their eyes, so sorry that the twins were about to experience everything they had endured for however long they had been there.

"Does anyone know how to get out of here?" Alex asked, but none of them responded, as if they had been trained not to speak. Even the children were silent.

"How is this happening?" Conner grunted. He violently shook the bars of the cell, but they didn't budge.

"That's no use," said a voice behind the twins. "Those bars are made out of pure stone."

Alex and Conner turned to face the prisoner occupying the cell next to theirs. Crouched over in the

darkest corner of his cell was an old man. He was thin and had a long, gray beard and tattered clothing.

"There's got to be some way out of here," Conner said.

"I've heard every man and woman say that when they were first brought here," the old man said. "But sadly, there isn't."

"How long have you been here?" Alex asked him.

"Years," the man said. He leaned forward, and the light fell on his face. His face was as tired and ragged as his clothes. He had a wandering eye, so the twins couldn't tell which one of them he was speaking to.

"Say, don't I know you two from somewhere?" he asked.

The twins knew this wasn't possible, but the man seemed convinced and, for whatever reason, the man seemed oddly familiar to them, too.

"I don't believe so," Alex said. "We're rather new to the area."

"I could swear it," the old man said. "Are you sure I never traded you a magic flute for a chicken? Or perhaps a singing flower for a lamb?"

"No, I'm sorry, we've never traded anything with you before—" Alex said, and then she realized who he was: the wandering eye, the long beard, the raggedy clothing… *could it be?* She pulled Conner aside. "Conner, he's the Traveling Tradesman, the one from the journal!"

Conner couldn't believe it. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Sir," said Alex, kneeling down to him. "Are you by chance known as the Traveling Tradesman?"

The man had to think about it. Obviously the years of enslavement had taken their toll on his mind.

"Yes, I believe that is what they called me," he said. He was happy to be reminded of a time when he wasn't a slave.

The twins were so pleased to hear this. "Ask him if he knows what happened to the man who wrote the journal!" Conner whispered into Alex's ear, and she nodded.

"Mr. Tradesman," Alex said. "Do you remember a man coming to you and asking about the Wishing Spell?"

"The Wishing Spell?" the Tradesman asked. At first, it seemed he had no idea what she was talking about, but then recognition dawned on his face. "Why, yes, I do! He was one of the last customers I did business with before I was brought here. Silly lad, he talked about wanting to travel to another world. And I thought *I* was mad."

"Did he ever make it?" Alex asked. "Did he find all the items of the Wishing Spell?"

"I don't know," the Tradesman said, and the twins slumped. "I never saw him again, so it's possible." He looked up at them curiously. "Why do you ask?"

The twins looked to each other. They didn't know what to tell him.

"Don't tell me you two are chasing after the Wishing Spell, too?" he asked.

They looked at each other guiltily. Conner leaned down next to Alex and began asking questions of his own.

"We're trying, but we don't know everything we're looking for," Conner said.

The Tradesman laughed. "No one does; that's the beauty of it. Some people know the descriptions of the items it requires, but no one knows what they are for sure."

"Like Hagatha," Alex said. "She only knew what the riddles were. The man she told them to had to figure out what they were on his own, but he could have been wrong."

"What if we found Hagatha and asked her for her opinion—?" Conner began.

"Hagatha is dead," the Tradesman said.

"Dead?" Alex gasped. "How did she die?"

"She fell into the Thornbush Pit," the Tradesman said.

"What is the Thornbush Pit?" Alex asked.

"Good heavens, child, are you daft? After the curse was broken on the Sleeping Kingdom, all the thornbush and shrubbery that had grown wild around the kingdom was cleared out and dumped into a large and deep pit," the Tradesman said. "Hagatha was collecting some of the thornbush for her home and fell in."

"That's awful," Alex said.

"She called for help for days, but no one would help her; no one wanted to help an old hag," the Tradesman said. "Just before she died, Hagatha cursed the thornbush so that it would grow onto anything or anyone near it and pull it straight to the bottom, where she was trapped, forever."

"That's intense," Conner said.

"Since then, however, it's been used as a wasteland. People from all over the kingdoms journey there to drop off anything they never want to see again," he said.

"I wonder if there's anyone else we could speak to?" Alex said.

"Whatever journey you were on, I'm afraid it's over," the Tradesman said. "Once you're here, you're here, and there is nothing you can do about it." He turned away from them.

A commotion came from up the tunnel leading into the dungeon. Trolls and goblins led the men and women who had been serving in the tunnels and the common room back into their cells. They all looked as if they could sleep for a year if permitted.

"Time for sleep!" a troll ordered, and then extinguished all the torches in the room with a bucket of water. "And if anyone makes a sound, no one will be fed tomorrow!" The trolls and goblins left the dungeon chuckling.

The room was pitch-black. Alex found Conner in the darkness and they rested beside each other.

"I just don't want Mom to worry," Alex said with big, teary eyes. "The longer we're in here, the longer she's going to be alone."

"I'm sure Grandma is with her," Conner said. "They probably have the entire police department out looking for us. It'll be an interesting conversation once we get home and tell them where we've been all this time."

"Thanks for being positive, Conner," Alex said.

Despite the little comfort her brother gave her, Alex cried herself to sleep.

Conner couldn't sleep. He couldn't stop thinking that, just a week before, he had been safe and sound in his own bed, fearing nothing but schoolwork and Mrs. Peters. And now, here he was, in the dungeons of another dimension, facing a life of slavery. How quickly times had changed….

Conner had just dozed off when he suddenly awoke; he felt like someone was watching him. He opened one eye and saw, standing on the other side of the cell door holding a single candle, the troll girl they had seen in the common room. She had been watching him sleep.

"Can I help you?" asked Conner, very creeped out.

"What's your name?" the troll girl asked him in an airy and engaging voice.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked.

"Because I'd like to know everything about you," she said with a dreamy smile that made Conner feel sick.

"I'm Conner. Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Trollbella," she said. "I'm a troll princess. My father is the Troll King. Do you have a girlfriend, Conner?"

Oh no, Conner thought. She had a *crush* on him. He was suddenly so grateful for the bars between them.

"Um… can't say that I do," Conner said awkwardly. "It's hard to meet people after having been recently enslaved by trolls and goblins."

"Oh, I know!" Trollbella said, with big flirty eyes. "Trolls and goblins are the worst! I hate living here. I would move away if I could. Everything is so unorganized and everyone is so mean, and don't get me started on troll boys! They don't know how to treat a lady!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," Conner said, hoping a goblin would walk in and take him away to work in a tunnel and save him from this situation.

"I'm just a hopeless romantic myself," Trollbella said, batting her eyelashes and twirling one of her pigtails. "Can I call you Butterboy?"

"Definitely not," Conner said.

"Conner, what's going on?" asked Alex, waking up.

"Who is *she*?" Trollbella asked. Her playful expression fell into a threatened frown.

"Relax, this is just my sister," Conner said.

"Hi?" said Alex, very confused about what was happening.

"I don't like her," Trollbella said, pointing at Alex.

Alex was taken aback. Had she done something wrong?

"She grows on you," Conner said. "And if I had to be enslaved for life with someone, I'm glad it's her."

"Have you enjoyed your stay with us so far?" Trollbella asked.

"Not really," Conner said. Was she kidding or just stupid?

"We'd really like to get out of here if you could help us," Alex said.

"I'm not talking to you!" Trollbella yelled at Alex. She then turned her head slowly and smiled at Conner. "I may be able to give you freedom in exchange for something else."

"What's that?" Conner said. Both the twins would have been on the edge of their seats if they weren't on a dirty dungeon floor.

"A kiss," Trollbella said, staring passionately at Conner.

Conner gulped. "Well, I guess we're going to be slaves forever."

Trollbella frowned. Alex hit Conner upside the head.

"Kiss her, you idiot, and then we'll get out of here!" Alex said.

"Don't hit my Butterboy!" Trollbella said. "And I never said I would let *you* go, I only said I'd let *him* go."

"I think he'd be more inclined if you promised to let both of us go," Alex said.

"No, I wouldn't! Please don't speak on my behalf," Conner chimed in, but neither of them was listening to him.

Trollbella's nostrils flared up. She didn't like negotiating. She turned around and disappeared

without saying a word.

"Way to go, Conner!" Alex said. "That may have been our only chance to escape!"

"There's no way I'm kissing *that*!" Conner said. "Freedom or no freedom, you're asking way too much of me!"

The twins both jumped back from the cell door. Trollbella had quickly returned with a key; she was ready to make a deal.

"Pucker up, Butterboy," Trollbella said, and pushed her head up against the bars of the cell door.

"I can't do this. I physically can't do this!" Conner said.

"Do you ever want to see home again?" Alex asked him.

Conner looked as if he were about to vomit and cry at the same time. At a snail's pace he approached Trollbella with his lips extended. He wasn't going fast enough for Alex, so she pushed him toward the cell door and Trollbella grabbed hold of him through the bars. She planted a big, fat, juicy kiss on him.

"Plaaaah!" Conner said, breaking away from her. He was wiping his mouth manically and gasping for air. Trollbella had a huge, satisfied grin on her face.

"That was the worst thing you have ever done to me!" Conner said, pointing at Alex, feeling completely betrayed. "How could you?"

"All right, Trollbella," said Alex, ignoring her brother's dramatics. "A deal is a deal. Let us go."

Trollbella's smile dropped into a scowl. She reluctantly unlocked the cell door and opened it. And as she did, Alex caught sight of the other slaves in the dungeon. The few that were awake had been silently and intently staring at the twins. They had never seen anyone be freed before; they hadn't thought it was possible.

"You're free to go," Trollbella said.

The twins briskly walked out of the cell, but as Alex passed Trollbella, she swiftly grabbed the key and pushed the troll princess into the cell, slamming the door behind her.

"Let me out of here right now!" Trollbella screamed. "This wasn't part of the deal!"

"I can't leave without the others," Alex said. She ran around unlocking the doors on all the cells. "Everyone wake up! We're getting out of here! Come on!"

She ran over to the pile of waste on the side of the room and retrieved all their things.

"Guards!" Trollbella howled. "Guards! The slaves are escaping!"

"Trollbella?" Conner said. "Please be quiet! Would you do that? Please? For your Butterboy?"

Trollbella blushed. "All right, Butterboy. For you, I'll be quiet."

The slaves all stirred to life. It took them a moment to understand what Alex was saying; they had dreamed about this day for so long. Many eagerly jumped up and left their cells, but others hesitated, including the Traveling Tradesman.

"Come on," Alex said. "What are you waiting for?"

"Are you two mad? They'll skin us alive if we try to escape," the Tradesman said. This worried some of the others, especially the children.

"Would you rather die in your cell or die trying to get back the life they stole from you?" Alex said.

Alex's words must have inspired them, because they all gathered around her. Even the Tradesman was willing to take a chance for freedom. He nodded at Alex as he joined the group.

"Does anyone know the best way out of here?" Alex asked.

"We need to get to the tunnels!" a man said.

"Yes, the tunnels!" a woman agreed.

"How do we get there?" Conner asked.

"We'll go up to the common room and past the stone arch. The trolls and goblins have built tunnels leading to every kingdom. That's how they get around," the Tradesman said.

"Do we need to worry about anyone catching us?" Conner asked.

"They're all asleep by now," Trollbella said with a sigh from her cell, "even the guards. That's why no one came when I called."

"All right, let's go," Alex said. "Everyone be as quiet as possible and help the older and younger ones in the group."

Everyone nodded, and Alex led the way out of the dungeon, praying it would be the last time any of them were ever in this room again.

"Until we meet again, Butterboy," Trollbella said, and blew Conner a kiss.

"Whatever," Conner said, and then followed the others out of the dungeon.

Trollbella smiled from horn to horn. This had been the most exciting day of her entire life.

The group of escapees traveled up the tunnel to the common room and snuck past a line of goblin guards. Just as Trollbella had said, they were asleep while standing guard.

They finally reached the common room and covered their mouths in horror at what they saw. All the trolls and goblins that Alex and Conner had seen carousing on the way in were spread across the floor, passed out. How were they going to get to the other side of the room without stepping on one of them?

Some were snoring, others twitched in their sleep. Even the Troll King and the Goblin King were sleeping in their thrones. You could barely see the floor between the unconscious monsters sprawled across the room.

"Quickly and quietly!" Alex whispered to the group. "We can do this; just be as careful as possible."

They began tiptoeing around the sleeping creatures. Carefully they put their feet between the monsters' spread-out limbs, between the broken plates and goblets across the dirt floor, and between the knocked-over chairs and tables.

Every time a troll or a goblin made any noise or movement, everyone froze, their hearts stopped for a moment. If any of the monsters were to wake up and see their slaves walking through the room toward the exit, it would be a disaster.

They were almost at the stone tunnel. Alex stopped in the middle of the room and made sure everyone passed her safely and that no one was left behind. Eventually, everyone had made it except her brother, who remained very still in the back of the room. He was staring at the Troll King and the Goblin King with wide eyes and an open mouth.

"Conner! What are you doing?" Alex asked in her loudest whisper.

"Look!" he mouthed, only a little whisper coming out. "Look at the crown! It's the crown!"

Alex looked up at the stone crown above the Troll King's and Goblin King's heads.

"What about it?" Alex whispered.

"It's the crown for the Wishing Spell!" Conner said. " 'A stony crown that's made to share, found deep within a savage lair'!"

Alex could feel her heart beating in her throat. Conner was right. It fit the description perfectly.

"What are you two doing? We're waiting for you!" the Tradesman said from the stone tunnel.

Alex and Conner looked at each other. They knew they couldn't leave without the crown.

"Go ahead without us!" Alex said.

"Suit yourselves!" the Tradesman said, and then left with the others down the stone tunnel.

"I'm going to get it!" Conner whispered to Alex.

"Be careful!" Alex said.

Conner slowly moved through the room. He accidentally kicked a goblet, and it made a loud *ding*, causing a few of the trolls and goblins to twitch in their sleep.

"Sorry!" Conner mouthed to Alex. He climbed up onto the throne platform. The crown was pretty high up; he would have to climb up onto the thrones to get it.

He climbed onto the armrest of the Troll King's throne. His left leg was so close to the king's face that Conner could feel the king's warm breath through his jeans. Conner swung his right leg onto the armrest of the Goblin King's throne and reached up for the crown. It was still too high. He would have to jump for it.

Alex had to cover her eyes. Her hands were trembling.

Conner jumped and tried to grab the crown, but he was just a few inches too short. He jumped again; the tips of his fingers touched it this time. He jumped once more—this time, the highest jump yet—and grabbed it. Unfortunately, on his way down, he missed the armrests and landed right in the lap of the Goblin King.

"Ahhhhhh!" the Goblin King screamed.

Alex took her hands from her face just in time to see her terrified brother sprawled across the Goblin King's lap, with the crown held tightly in his hands. Conner jumped up and ran as fast as he could, grabbing his sister's arm on the way toward the exit.

"After them!" the Goblin King ordered. "Someone grab them!"

The entire room of trolls and goblins began waking up to the Goblin King's yells.

Alex and Conner weren't careful about what or who they stepped on. They ran straight through the common room and down the tunnel of stones. Dozens of trolls and goblins chased after them.

The twins ran past the two horrible statues at the tunnel's entrance. The goblin statue suddenly crashed to the ground just as they passed it, blocking the tunnel. Alex screamed—had they been a second later, it would have fallen on them.

They turned to see the Tradesman, out of breath and holding his heart. He had just knocked over the statue and blocked the tunnel. The trolls and goblins had reached the end of the tunnel and were struggling to get past the fallen statue.

"That should keep them busy for a while," the Tradesman said. "Now run!"

"Where's everyone else?" Alex asked.

"They've fled to the tunnels! They're safe!" he said.

"What about you?" Alex asked.

"I couldn't leave without you," the Tradesman said. "I'm old, children. I'd never outrun them anyway. You two still have a lot of living to do, so run before they get past the statue. Hurry!"

"We're not leaving without you!" Alex said.

"I'm wanted in every kingdom," the Tradesman said between deep breaths. "No matter where I go, I'll end up behind bars. I've done a lot of bad things in my day, children. I've made a lot of trades and deals that I shouldn't have. I deserve this. You don't. Now run!"

Alex's and Conner's feet moved before their minds could decide whether to stay any longer. They ran ahead and found a series of tunnels leading in different directions. Each had a sign above the entrance that said where the tunnel led to.

"Come on," Alex said, and grabbed Conner's arm, pulling him into the tunnel that said FAIRY KINGDOM above it. They tucked the troll and goblin crown safely away in Alex's bag.

"Did we do the right thing?" Alex asked Conner as they ran down the tunnel. "Should we have left him?"

"He wasn't going to come with us; his mind was made up," Conner said. He knew they had done everything they could, but he still felt guilty, too.

"How could a stranger give up so much for us?" Alex said.

"Maybe he thought trading his freedom for ours would be the only honest trade he'd ever make," Conner said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FAIRY KINGDOM

Alex and Conner emerged from underground between a tree and a big rock. They were covered in dirt and cobwebs and were breathing hard and sweating profusely; it had been so stuffy in the tunnel.

"We made it," Alex said. "We're at the surface."

"I never thought I'd be so happy to see the sun and the sky," Conner said.

It was sometime around noon, and the twins had found themselves in a pleasant, grassy field next to a perfectly groomed path.

"Is that the path we should have taken after the Red Riding Hood Kingdom?" Conner asked.

"Yup," Alex said, looking down at the map. "But think of all the fun we would have missed out on."

They shared a laugh. The twins brushed themselves off and headed down the path. They felt very safe in this place. All the trees and fields were perfectly manicured and inviting. Then again, anything would have seemed inviting after narrowly escaping a lifetime of slavery for trolls and goblins.

"Are we positive that we're in the Fairy Kingdom?" Conner said, looking around.

"I'd say it's very possible," Alex said, but she wasn't looking down at the map.

"How do you figure?" Conner asked her.

"Well, *that's* an indication," Alex said, and pointed.

Grazing around a perfect little stream ahead of them, to their amazement, was a herd of unicorns. They were beautiful: white with silver horns, silver hooves, and silver manes.

Conner's forehead wrinkled, and his mouth dropped open. "Oh, jeez," he said. "That is the most obnoxious thing I've ever seen in my life!"

"I want to pet one!" Alex said, and ran toward them.

"Alex, be careful!" Conner said. "They could have rabies!"

"Unicorns don't have rabies, Conner!" Alex said.

"You don't know where those horns have been!" Conner called out.

Alex walked up to the herd, slowing her pace so she wouldn't spook them. They were so majestic and graceful, she just had to stop and admire them for a moment. One saw her and walked toward her.

Any sane person would have been scared by a wild animal approaching them, but Alex wasn't. For whatever reason, she knew the unicorn wasn't going to harm her. It lowered its head, and she petted its face.

Conner walked up and stood just behind her. All the other unicorns slowly surrounded them.

"Alex," Conner said. "This is making me incredibly nervous."

The unicorns formed a perfect circle around the twins and bowed to them. Alex smiled from ear to ear. Conner raised a suspicious eyebrow.

"This is trippy," he said.

"Maybe they're welcoming us into their kingdom?" Alex said.

The unicorns stood still as if frozen and didn't show any sign of moving. Conner grabbed Alex's hand, and they left the circle and rejoined the path. The stream traveled beside the path as the twins traveled down it.

"Is it just me, or is that water sparkling?" Conner asked. He was right. The farther they walked

along the stream, the more it appeared to glow and shimmer.

"That must mean we're getting close!" Alex said happily. "That's Thumbelina Stream. It should take us straight into the Fairy Kingdom."

"I say we grab hold of the first fairy we find and call her names like 'oversized insect' or 'fish bait' until she cries," Conner said. "That's how we'll get the tears."

"No! We should come up with a really sad story to tell," Alex said, and then a thought occurred to her. "How are we going to collect the tears once they've been shed?"

Conner shrugged. "Maybe we'll have to kidnap a fairy and keep her around until we need her to cry? What does the journal say to do?"

Alex opened the journal and found the section about the Fairy Kingdom.

Acquiring a fairy tear is not an easy task.

"Surprise surprise," Conner said.

Since fairies for the most part are very happy beings, it will be hard to find one so overcome with grief that it is brought to tears. However you manage, hopefully under moral conditions, you can use the vial hidden inside this journal's spine to contain the tear.

Alex turned the book on its side and looked closely through the hole where the pages were connected to the spine. Deep inside the journal's spine was a small glass vial with a cork stopper.

"Look at this!" Alex said, pulling the vial out of the spine. "It says to put the tear in this vial."

"Great. Now all we need is an emotional fairy," Conner said.

Alex stopped walking. "Do you hear that?" she said.

Tiny sniffling sounds came from close by. The twins looked around but couldn't see quite where they were coming from.

"What is that?" Conner asked. He looked down beside him and had to blink a few times to make sure he wasn't imagining what he saw. "No, this can't be real. This is too easy…. *Nothing* has been this easy."

"What are you talking about?" Alex asked him. Conner turned her shoulders to face what he was looking at.

Sitting on a rock on the side of the path was a fairy… and she was *crying*.

She was only a few inches tall and had big, blue wings similar to a butterfly's. She had dark hair and a purple dress made of leaves and shoes made out of flower buds. Her tiny hands were clasped around her big eyes, and tears were running down her face.

The twins just stood there and stared down at her. They were afraid their minds were playing tricks on them, they both wanted to see this so badly.

"What are you looking at?" the fairy said to the twins in a tiny, high-pitched voice.

"We're sorry," Alex said. "Why are you crying?"

Conner jerked his head toward his sister, and she knew he was thinking, *Who cares! Get a tear!*

"That's none of your business!" the fairy said, and sobbed some more.

"Forgive me," Alex said. "I can tell you're upset about something, and I wouldn't be myself if I didn't ask if there's anything I could do to help you."

"That's sweet, thank you," the fairy said, changing her attitude. "I'm just having a very rough day, that's all."

Conner kept trying to grab the vial from his sister's hand, but she wouldn't let him take it.

"What's your name?" Alex asked the fairy.

"Trix," the fairy said.

"Hello, Trix. My name is Alex, and this is my brother, Conner," Alex said. "Would you like to talk about what's troubling you?"

Conner was shocked. She was actually more interested in *helping* this fairy than collecting one of her tears.

"My trial is in a few minutes, and I'm scared," Trix said.

"Your trial?" Conner asked. "Did you kill somebody?"

"Of course not," said Trix. "I used magic on another fairy, and now the Fairy Council may ban me from the Fairy Kingdom."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," Alex said.

"What did you do to the other fairy?" Conner asked.

"I turned his wings into prune leaves," the fairy said, and cried some more. "It was only for a moment! I turned them back! But he was provoking me! He kept teasing me about my size!"

"They're going to ban you from the entire kingdom just for turning someone's wings into leaves for a couple seconds?" Conner asked.

"They've been very strict ever since that Enchantress put the curse on Sleeping Beauty," Trix said. "The Fairy Council believes that every fairy is a representative of their order and should act as such."

"Those are high expectations," Alex said.

"I can't leave the Fairy Kingdom," Trix cried. "It would be so lonely, and I hate being alone! I don't have many friends to begin with!"

Alex let Trix use the corner of her shirt to dry her tears. Conner turned bright red watching his sister dispose of the tears so carelessly. He had to make the fairy produce more.

"Being banned would really be terrible, though, wouldn't it?" Conner said. "You'd probably have to live in an old bird nest in the Dwarf Forests and be chased by wolves and witches every day, and that's only if an ogre doesn't capture you in a jar and barbeque you first."

Trix started hysterically crying at this.

"Conner, what is wrong with you?" Alex yelled.

Conner snatched the vial from her hand and collected a tear from Trix's face just as it dripped off her chin. Alex gave him a dirty look.

"Would you like us to go with you to your trial?" asked Alex, leaning down to be eye level with Trix. "For emotional support?"

"Yes, I would like that," Trix said. "That's so kind of you!"

"Well, I know what it feels like to think the whole world is against you," Alex said.

"We'd better get going. I don't want to be late!" Trix flew into the air and fluttered down the path. The twins walked after her.

"Alex, are you crazy?" Conner said. "We've got a tear. Let's get out of here!"

"We're the only people in the world who this fairy has," Alex said. "We're going to be good people and help her out."

Conner grunted with frustration. "Helping this fairy isn't going to take away bad memories you have from school, Alex."

Alex ignored him and followed Trix down the path. Conner followed, sulking the entire way.

They traveled deeper into the Fairy Kingdom. Everything in the distance seemed to sparkle. They thought it was a mirage at first, but the closer they got, they saw that the trees, the grass, and the path all shined and shimmered in the sunlight.

"What's up with all the glitter?" Conner asked.

"I don't think it's glitter; I think it's magic," Alex said.

They reached the heart of the kingdom and were completely bewildered by what they saw. It was like they were standing in a gigantic tropical garden with large, colorful flowers of all shapes and species. There were weeping willows over small ponds and vines that grew across the ground and up the trees. There were beautiful bridges over many streams and ponds.

There were fairies everywhere. Many flew around in the air, some just hovered above the ground, and some walked on smaller paths adjacent to the one the twins were on. They were all different shapes and sizes and colors. Some were taller than Alex and Conner, some were as small as Trix, and some didn't seem even to be solid, but rather made from pure light.

There were just as many male fairies as there were female. Some of the fairies wore gowns, others' clothes were made entirely from plant materials, and some wore nothing at all. Many had made miniature homes in the branches of the trees or in mushrooms on the ground, and there were fairies who even lived underwater with colorful fish.

Something about this place made Alex feel as if everything were right in the world. It gave her more hope, excitement, and happiness with every step she took. It was paradise.

"Have you ever seen something so beautiful in your entire life?" Alex asked her brother.

"Not too shabby," Conner said.

"The Fairy Council operates in the Fairy Palace. It's just up ahead," Trix said, and gestured the twins to follow her over a pond. They, of course, took a bridge.

They walked toward a palace made entirely out of golden arches and pillars. It was completely open: There were no more than two walls to line each room, and all the windows were tall with no glass. When you lived in a place as beautiful as this, who would want to keep out the environment?

Trix took the twins to the center of the palace, into a long room with many seats facing the front.

"This would be the perfect place for a wedding!" Alex said.

At the front of the room were seven fairies Alex and Conner's size. They looked like a living rainbow: Each was dressed in a specific color, and they stood behind podiums positioned over an arch.

"That's the Fairy Council," Trix said. "That's Rosette, the red fairy, Tangerina, the orange fairy, Xanthous, the yellow fairy, Emerelda, the green fairy—she's mostly in charge—Skylene, the blue fairy, Violetta, the purple fairy, and Coral, the pink fairy."

Rosette was short and plump and had very rosy cheeks. Tangerina was stylish and wore her orange hair in a large beehive with actual bees flying around it. Xanthous was male; he wore a shiny suit, and parts of him were ablaze. Emerelda was tall and beautiful; she was black, and wore a long, emerald dress that matched her eyes and jewelry. Skylene was very pale and had hair the color of the

sky and flowing robes the color of the sea. Violetta was the oldest and had grayish-purple hair. Coral was the youngest, no more than a few years older than the twins in appearance, and wore a simple pink dress and had a pair of pink wings on her back.

There were two empty seats on either side of the podiums.

"Who sits there?" Alex asked Trix.

"The Fairy Godmother sits on the left and Mother Goose sits on the right," Trix said. "They complete the Fairy Council, although they're rarely here. They're always traveling around the kingdoms helping people."

"Is that you, Trix?" Emerelda asked.

"Yes, I'm here," Trix peeped nervously, and flew to the front of the podiums.

"You're late. Please come forward," Emerelda said. She was gracious but authoritative, someone the twins would definitely want in their corner during an altercation. "Trix, do you know why you've been called before the Fairy Council?"

Trix shamefully nodded her head. "Yes, ma'am."

"Being a fairy requires a strong sense of responsibility," Tangerina said. "Responsibility you haven't shown."

Trix nodded some more, her eyes swelling with tears. "I know," she squeaked.

"Unfortunately, we can't let your actions go unpunished," Violetta said.

"We need to make an example of you, to reinforce the number one rule of being a fairy," Rosette said.

"To never, under any circumstance, use your magic harmfully against another person, place, or thing," Xanthous said.

"Unfortunately, there's only one thing for us to do," Skylene said.

"We have to banish you from the Fairy Kingdom," Coral said.

Trix covered her eyes and wept harder than she had all day. "I understand," she said through her sobs.

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Conner yelled from the back. "Hold on! Are you kidding me?"

He promptly walked to the front of the room and stood next to the spot where Trix was hovering.

"Conner!" Alex said, and tried to grab him, but was too late.

"Are you seriously going to ban her for making one little mistake?" Conner asked the council with his hands on his hips.

There was whispering and murmuring among them. They were appalled that someone would so openly question their judgment.

"Please don't try to help me!" Trix whispered to Conner.

"Young man, who do you think you are?" Xanthous said.

"Well, I'm just a kid, but even I can tell you that your ruling is ridiculous," Conner said.

They all gasped except for Emerelda, who kept her calm and imposing demeanor. Alex slapped an open palm against her forehead.

"How dare you!" Tangerina said, and the bees swirling around her hair grew mad and flew faster around her head.

"You are out of line!" Violetta said.

"How disrespectful!" Coral said.

"How rude!" Skylene said.

Emerelda was the only member of the assembly to remain silent. She studied Conner with her emerald eyes.

"Silence," Emerelda ordered. She raised a hand, and all her fellow assembly fairies went quiet. "Let the boy speak. I want to hear what he has to say. Go ahead, young man."

Conner wasn't sure if this was a trick or not, but he didn't hold back.

"Listen, I'm not a fairy—thank God—and I'm not perfect, either. I try to be the best person or the best student possible, but every once in a while I slip up—I forget a homework assignment, or I fall asleep in class. My best effort isn't as good as someone else's might be, and no one should have the right to scold or punish me or publicly humiliate me for it!" Conner said.

"Trix knew what the rules were, and she still committed an offense against one of her peers," Rosette said.

"No one can be perfect," Conner said. "And from what I hear, the guy had it coming! Where is his trial? Why isn't he here? Why do I always get detention for sleeping when it's ancient Mesopotamia that should be punished for being so boring?"

The council continued to be outraged by this outburst. Many members didn't want to tolerate it and tried to leave.

"I hear what the child is saying," Emerelda said.

"But we can't just pardon Trix. We're the Fairy Council; it wouldn't send a good message to the rest of the kingdoms," Tangerina said.

"Look, orange lady," Conner said, "in the last week, my sister and I have almost been eaten by a witch, narrowly missed being attacked by a pack of wolves, were almost killed by a possessive bridge troll, survived a burning castle, and barely escaped a life of enslavement in the Troll and Goblin Territory! If you ask me, you've got bigger problems than a fairy turning a jerk's wings into leaves. Looks to me like you busy yourselves with stupid little things so you feel like you're doing something, when in reality you can't handle what's really going on out there!"

The council went silent and all the members appeared to become very concerned.

"Enslavement?" Skylene asked. "You mean the trolls and goblins are still kidnapping and enslaving people?"

"Yes!" Conner said. "There were dozens of us down there! We really could have used your help, but I guess you were too busy slapping fairies' wrists for playing pranks on one another."

Although they held their stoic expressions, the council was secretly ashamed of themselves. Conner was right. They eyed one another for a moment before Emerelda broke the silence.

"On behalf of this council, I hereby forgive Trix for her crimes," Emerelda said. "Xanthous, Skylene, and Tangerina, I say we pay a visit to the Troll King and the Goblin King immediately. And furthermore, let this be a lesson. To all of us."

Xanthous, Skylene, and Tangerina nodded, and then disappeared into thin air with a *pop!*

"Thank you, Mr….?" Emerelda said.

"Wishington," Conner said. "Conner Wishington."

Emerelda smiled, and then disappeared with the others.

Trix flew up to Conner's face and gave him a huge hug. "That's the bravest and nicest thing anyone has ever done for me!" Trix said.

Conner looked back at his sister. She was beaming with pride; she was so proud of her brother. It was a look Conner rarely got to see.

“You know, helping a fairy isn’t going to take away any unhappy memories from school,” Alex told him when she joined Conner and Trix near the podiums.

Conner slyly grinned. “I had to say something. I would have regretted it if I hadn’t.”

The remaining Fairy Council fairies began to leave. Some simply walked off, and others disappeared into thin air, leaving behind sparks or bubbles as they went. Coral was searching the room for something and patting her lap as she went.

“Here, Fisher! Where are you, Fisher?” Coral said.

A fish with four legs ran past Alex and Conner and jumped up into Coral’s arms.

“There you are!” Coral said. “It’s just about time for your lunch!”

Alex and Conner looked at each other, confused, each wondering if the other had just seen it, too.

“Is that what I think it is?” Conner asked.

“I think so,” Alex said.

Coral was just about to leave when the twins stopped her.

“Excuse me,” Alex said. “Where did you get your fish?”

“Oh, Fisher?” Coral said. “I dropped a wand in a lake once and granted him a wish after he swam down and got it for me. He wished for legs, silly thing, so he could play with some boy who lived in a village nearby. The boy ended up dying, sadly, so Fisher came to live with me.”

Coral’s wings began to flap, and she flew away with her pet fish.

“So that *was* what we thought it was,” Conner said.

“Yes,” said Alex, her head spinning with questions. “That was the Walking Fish from Dad’s story!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A WOLF PACT

There was blood everywhere. White feathers and bits of wood covered the ground. A driver had been transporting a cart full of geese into the Northern Kingdom when the Big Bad Wolf Pack attacked. The only thing that remained in one piece was the green, floppy hat the driver had been wearing.

The wolves were spread out under the trees, chewing on the bones of their victims. Malumclaw jerked his head up and stared into the trees. Someone was coming; he could smell them. Whoever this person was, their scent made him anxious.

"We've got company," Malumclaw growled. All the wolves jumped to their feet, ready to attack again if they had to. But they were no match for who was approaching.

A dark, hooded figure slowly moved through the trees and up to the wolves. It stood fearlessly in front of them for a moment before unveiling itself.

"Hello, Malumclaw," said the Evil Queen.

"Who are you?" Malumclaw barked. The woman before him, less than half his size, was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"You don't know me, but you know of me," the Evil Queen said. "Everyone does."

"It's the Evil Queen," a wolf snarled.

Malumclaw began shifting his weight on his front paws. He was intimidated, and he didn't like it.

"You have a lot of nerve approaching my pack," he said. "I should have one of my wolves rip your throat out."

"I dare you," the Evil Queen said. There wasn't an ounce of fear in her body. She walked closer to them, and the wolves cowered back, Malumclaw included.

"What do you want from us?" he demanded.

"I've come to make a deal," she said.

"We don't make deals," Malumclaw growled.

"You will once you know what I have to offer," the Evil Queen said.

This intrigued the wolf. "What kind of *deal*?" he asked.

"A trade," the Evil Queen said. "There are two children traveling through the kingdoms, one boy and one girl—twins. I want you to find them and bring them to me unscathed."

"You want *children*?" Malumclaw mocked.

"They have something—several things, actually—that I need," the Evil Queen said. "I would do it myself, but I'm indisposed at the moment."

"And if we bring them to you, what will you give us in return?" he asked.

"*When* you bring them to me, I shall give you the one thing you want more than anything else in the world," the Evil Queen said.

Malumclaw laughed. "Wolves *want* for nothing," he said.

The Evil Queen stared at him as if she were looking into his soul.

"Is that so?" she asked. "Then why do you and your pack crusade around the lands terrorizing everything in your path? What are you trying to prove? Whose revenge are you seeking?"

Malumclaw was silent. He couldn't deny it.

“I will give you the one thing that will avenge your father’s death wholly,” the Evil Queen said. “I will give you Queen Red Riding Hood in exchange for the twins.”

All the wolves, including Malumclaw, growled their doubts, but the idea was intriguing to him.

“And how could you possibly do that?” he said.

The Evil Queen looked at him so sternly that his heart began to race. “Do not question me. I will have the young queen in my possession by the end of the week. Bring me the children, and I will hand her over to you. Do we have a deal or not?”

Malumclaw looked at the frightened members of his pack. They nodded at him; they didn’t want to upset the queen.

“Deal,” Malumclaw said. “But let me warn you, if you fail to keep your end of the bargain, we’ll snap your neck like a twig.”

The Evil Queen walked up to the wolf and stood inches from his face, looking him forcefully in the eye.

“Let *me* warn *you*,” she said. “Fail to keep your part, and I’ll have you all turned into rugs, just as Red Riding Hood did to your father. And if you ever threaten me again, I’ll skin you myself.”

Malumclaw froze. The Evil Queen knew she had him exactly where she wanted him.

“See you soon,” she said. She put her hood back over her head and disappeared into the trees in the direction she had come from.

All the wolves stood still for a moment, afraid to move.

“What are we waiting for?” Malumclaw shouted, his pride bruised. “We have twins to find!”

They charged into the horizon, howling in unison. The sound was deafening.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SLEEPING KINGDOM

Trix insisted that Alex and Conner stay with her the night after her trial. Of course, that meant the twins slept on the ground underneath her birdhouse-size home hanging from a tree branch, but it was a kind gesture nonetheless.

Alex and Conner couldn't sleep after seeing the Walking Fish in person. They laid under the stars of the Fairy Kingdom—most of which were actually just fairies sleeping in midair—and let their thoughts wander.

"I always thought that the Walking Fish was one of Dad's stories, one that he made up himself," Alex said. "I wonder how he heard it."

"Probably the same way he heard about all the other stories that come from this place," Conner said.

"But then why wasn't it as well known as Cinderella's or Snow White's stories? Why wasn't it written in *The Land of Stories*?" Alex said, and then asked a question that had been on her mind for a while: "Do you think Dad or Grandma were ever here? Do you think they ever traveled into the Land of Stories and just never told us?"

Conner had to think about it. The idea had crossed his mind once or twice before, considering that *The Land of Stories* had been in their grandma and dad's possession before their grandma had passed it on. Could they just as easily have been transported into this world as Alex and Conner had? And if they had, how had their dad and grandma managed to find a way home?

"I don't think so," Conner ultimately decided. "They loved fairy tales so much. If they ever got here and saw everything we've seen, I doubt they would have left."

The next morning, Trix generously thanked them again and again, and after they shared good-byes the twins started their journey into the next kingdom.

"Sleeping Kingdom, here we come!" Alex said.

"Why do I have a feeling that the spindle is going to be the most difficult item to get?" Conner said.

Alex opened the journal to see if her brother's prediction was true.

The spindle that pricked Sleeping Beauty's finger was the easiest item for me to collect. I had no prior plan of acquiring it and simply pleaded my case to the queen, and she was very sympathetic.

She let me take the spindle on the condition that I would return it to her once I was finished using it. Queen Sleeping Beauty is very wise, especially for someone who had been asleep for a century, and I believe she knew more about what I was after than she was willing to admit.

"Well, that's lucky!" Conner said. "I wonder what sleeping for a hundred years does to you. Every morning when I wake up for school, after about the fourth or fifth time I hit the snooze button, I always think I can sleep for a hundred years. I wonder if you'd wake up super refreshed, or if you'd still be

drowsy afterward."

"That's an interesting thought," Alex said. "I wonder if she dreamed about anything. I assume it would have been a very long dream."

The twins had no money left but, claiming to have been separated from their parents, they managed to convince two drivers transporting a cart of goats to let them ride along into the Sleeping Kingdom. The twins didn't mind sitting in the back with the goats, but the goats weren't thrilled about sharing with the twins.

"What are you looking at?" Conner said to one of them after it had stared at him for a good half hour.

The road ran alongside a great sparkling ocean with water that was as blue as the sky. It was like an ocean from their world, except a thousand times more vibrant.

"Look how beautiful the ocean is here!" Alex said. "And look over there, it's Mermaid Bay!"

She was referring to a large bay just ahead that curved into the shoreline.

"It's pretty neat to know that, right now, as we sit in this cart, there are actual mermaids swimming down there," Alex said.

"Yeah," Conner said. "Too bad we didn't bring any snorkel gear."

Alex was flipping through the journal, making a list in her head.

"We have five items collected," she said. "All we need are the spindle, jewels from Snow White's coffin, and the 'saber from the deepest sea.' "

"Whatever that might be," Conner said.

Alex longingly stared out at the water. What could the 'saber from the deepest sea' be? With all her fairy-tale knowledge, she still couldn't figure it out, and it was starting to get to her. She was hoping that at any minute it would just appear in the middle of the ocean.

"We'll figure it out," Conner said. "Or I should say, *you'll* figure it out, and I'll pretend I helped."

After they had been on the road a bit, the twins couldn't help but eavesdrop on the conversation the drivers were having.

"Did you hear about the news from the Charming Kingdom?" one of the drivers asked the other.

"No," he said.

"Both of Queen Cinderella's glass slippers have been stolen!" the driver said.

"Stolen? By who?"

"I don't know, but I reckon there's a reward for anyone with information," he said.

The twins didn't know how to react to this news. If the kingdom was claiming the slippers had been stolen, had Cinderella or Sir Lampton *not* put the slipper in their bag? Was there a warrant out for their arrest? And then, the most troubling question of all: If they had one of the slippers, who had the other one?

"*Both* were stolen?" Alex whispered to her brother.

"It has to be that woman we saw in Red Riding Hood's castle," Conner said. "She must be collecting for the Wishing Spell, too! I knew it!"

"Let's just hope we get to the spindle before she does," Alex said.

The road turned away from the ocean, and the cart headed north into the Sleeping Kingdom.

It was a very hilly place surrounded by towering mountain ranges. It was a surprisingly dismal land, although the twins weren't sure what they had expected. All the fields were dry, and all the trees were bare. Everything seemed like it hadn't been alive for a very long time.

"Why is everything dead?" Conner asked.

"I don't think they're dead," Alex said. "I think they're *sleeping*."

Sleeping Beauty's castle was located in the center of a village called Sleepy Valley, and once the twins arrived there and hopped off the cart, they understood how it had gotten its name. The entire village surrounding the castle looked deserted.

The twins found a man standing behind the open window of a bakery. He was resting his head on his hand and his elbow on the windowsill. He was sleeping standing up.

"Excuse me?" Alex said, not wanting to be rude and wake him up.

"Yes?" the man asked with his eyes still closed.

"Where is everyone?" Alex asked.

"Resting," the man said with a yawn, and then began to snore.

Sure enough, as the twins walked through the village, they could see many other shopkeepers and servants drowsily moving about inside the shops, slowly getting their work done. They all looked as if they were about to fall asleep at any second.

"I thought the curse on the kingdom had been broken," Conner said.

"They don't seem to be sleeping because they *have* to, it looks like they're sleeping because they *want* to," Alex said.

Alex and Conner walked through the sluggish town and found Sleeping Beauty's castle. The castle was a spectacular sight. It was the tallest structure the twins had ever seen. It was made from peach-colored stones and its many tall towers soared into the sky with the tallest in the very center. When the twins looked closely, they saw the residue left from the vines that had once grown up the castle walls.

There were many vast gardens surrounding the castle, or at least there would have been if anything were alive. Gardeners slept in the garden, still clasping their tools. Every few minutes they would wake up and continue working, but they would fall back asleep almost immediately.

There were guards everywhere, but the twins effortlessly walked past them. Every once in a while a guard would open an eye and consider saying something to them but then decide to go back to sleep instead.

They found the main entrance to the castle and entered. They walked down a long hall with a soaring ceiling that led to the throne room. It had white pillars and a checkered floor. The ceiling was painted the colors of dusk, with vivid pinks and oranges. Guards lined the entire room, and they were all entirely unconscious.

Sitting on the throne ahead of them was a beautiful woman. She was speaking with two men; one was tall and handsome, and the other was short and old with a white beard.

The woman wore a tiara made of silver flowers and had long, flowing, golden hair. She wore a thin gown a shade of pale rose with matching gloves. The twins knew without a doubt that it was Sleeping Beauty.

She was speaking with a royal advisor and her husband, King Chase. She looked troubled and in a state of deep contemplation. She was tired, too, like the twins' mother looked when there was a lot on her mind.

"Perhaps we should enforce a law: No sleeping permitted during the day," the advisor said.

"Absolutely not," Sleeping Beauty said. "I will not force something so oppressive on my people. Let us not forget that this isn't their fault."

"The curse is over, Your Highness," the advisor said. "It's time for the kingdom to wake up and see that."

"As far as I'm concerned, the curse is upon us until the day this kingdom is in the exact condition it was before the spell was cast," Sleeping Beauty said. "I may be awake, but being asleep for one hundred years has taken a toll on them. They shouldn't be punished or held accountable for any of this."

"Darling, you may have no choice," King Chase said, taking her hand in his. "The kingdom is falling apart. There are no crops being grown or business being done."

"Let me think about this," she said, and let out a long sigh.

"May I make a suggestion?" Conner said, walking toward the trio. He took them by surprise; they didn't know anyone else in the room was conscious. Alex was a little scared. She had no idea what her brother was about to say. She hoped his speech in the Fairy Kingdom hadn't given him a big head.

"Who are you?" the advisor asked.

"I'm Conner, and this is my sister, Alex," he said.

Alex awkwardly waved from behind him. "You have a lovely castle!" she said.

"How did you get in here?" King Chase asked.

"Seriously?" Conner asked him, gesturing to the sleeping guards behind him. "This isn't exactly Fort Knox."

"They don't know what that is, Conner," Alex whispered.

"Young man," the advisor said. "With all due respect, this is a very important matter we're discussing, and—"

"And we've been trying to find a solution for years and still haven't come up with anything that doesn't take away basic human freedoms," Sleeping Beauty said. "So, if this young man thinks he has an answer, I say we let him speak."

The men didn't argue with her. Conner had the floor.

"Have any of you ever heard of coffee before?" Conner asked.

They stared blankly at him.

"Never mind. I've been told it stunts your growth, anyway," he said. "I fall asleep a lot in school. It's not my fault; my brain just turns off when it gets bored. A trick I discovered, when I remember to use it, is to wear a rubber band around my wrist and snap it right when I feel myself drifting off to sleep. The sting keeps me conscious for a good five minutes guaranteed."

They were puzzled by his proposal.

"Look, it isn't a rocket-science solution, but it works," Conner said. "And your people could do it to themselves, so you wouldn't be forcing them into anything. And maybe if they did it enough, they eventually wouldn't need to anymore."

They still needed convincing. Conner turned to Alex for help.

"Alex, do you have any rubber bands on you?" Conner asked.

"I may have some hair ties in my bag," Alex said. She put her bag on the floor and searched through it, accidently knocking the glass slipper out onto the floor. The *clank* echoed through the throne room.

The twins panicked. It was as if time had frozen. Sleeping Beauty, her husband, and the advisor grew very tense.

"How did you get that?" Sleeping Beauty asked.

"It's Queen Cinderella's glass slipper!" the advisor said.

"No, it's not what you think!" Alex said, quickly putting it back into her bag.

"We didn't steal it!" Conner said.

"Guards!" King Chase shouted.

A few guards from behind the twins suddenly awoke and became alert.

"Seize them!" the king shouted.

"Here we go again!" Conner said as the guards sprinted toward them. He grabbed Alex's wrist and pulled her into a run.

"Your Majesty!" Alex pleaded to Sleeping Beauty. "We've come to borrow your spindle! We're collecting objects for the Wishing Spell!"

Sleeping Beauty stood, about to speak, but the twins couldn't wait around to hear what she had to say. They were running around the throne room in circles, barely missing the extended hands of guards trying to grab hold of them.

Alex and Conner ran through a set of open doors leading out of the throne room. They had no idea where they were going, but they knew they had to move. They had been through too much to let guards catch them this time.

"I'm so tired of being chased!" Conner yelled.

They ran down hallway after hallway, making sharp turns whenever they could to throw off the guards. They were moving so fast that the beautiful architecture and artwork of the castle was nothing but a blur.

Suddenly, the hallway they were in came to a dead end.

"Now what are we going to do?" Alex asked.

"Quick! In here!" Conner said, and pulled her through the closest set of open doors. They found a stone staircase on the other side and ran up it. It spiraled higher and higher, and the twins wondered if it would ever end. They were climbing to an impossible height; they must have been headed to the tallest tower in the castle.

They reached the very top of the stairs and found a big, black door. They rushed through it and immediately locked it from the other side.

"Now where are we?" Conner asked, and looked around.

The twins were standing in a large, circular room with tall windows. There were violet drapes and a lavender rug. A balcony wrapped around the entire room outside. Only two pieces of furniture were in the room: an enormous bed and a spinning wheel made from dark wood.

"Conner," Alex said softly. "I think we're in Sleeping Beauty's room. The room she slept in for a hundred years."

Conner walked over to the bed. There was a beautiful engraving on the headboard that said:

FOR ONE HUNDRED YEARS, SHE SLEPT,
THE HEARTS OF HER PEOPLE, SHE KEPT,
SO THEY AWAITED WITH PATIENCE
FOR THE BLISS
OF TRUE LOVE AND TRUE LOVE'S
FIRST KISS.

Alex went to the spinning wheel, but the spindle was gone.

"The spindle isn't here!" Alex said. "I don't understand. The man who wrote the journal promised Sleeping Beauty he would return it after he used it!"

"Is it not here, or did he just not return it because the spell didn't work?" Conner asked.

The lock on the black door began to rattle as someone from the other side unlocked it.

"Hide!" Alex whispered. She and her brother dove underneath the bed.

The black door swung open. The twins expected to see the clunky boots of the guards, but instead they saw a pair of pink heels.

"Is that…?" Alex whispered.

"Is that what—*ouch!*" Conner hit his head hard on the bottom of the bed.

"You can come out from there," Sleeping Beauty said.

The twins couldn't tell if it was a trap.

"I've called off the guards," Sleeping Beauty added. "No one is going to hurt you."

The twins slowly crawled out from under the bed.

"We didn't steal the slipper," Alex said. "It's hard to explain, but I promise we're not thieves."

Sleeping Beauty nodded. "I believe you."

"You do?" Conner asked. He was stunned. "Because if I were you, I'd totally think we were thieves."

Sleeping Beauty smiled at them and took a seat on the bed. "So, you two are after the Wishing Spell?"

The twins nodded self-consciously.

"It's a really long story," Conner said.

"I'm sure," Sleeping Beauty said. "And you've come to ask me permission to borrow the spindle from my spinning wheel, haven't you?"

The twins guiltily nodded again. Sleeping Beauty laughed to herself.

"You know, not too long ago, a man came to my castle and asked me to borrow it," she said. "At first I was completely against the idea, but he convinced me."

"How'd he manage that?" Alex asked.

"He told me all about the Wishing Spell and how he had traveled to another world and fallen in love and was desperate to return. And being somewhat romantic myself, I let him humor me with the story," she said, and her smile faded back into the contemplative expression they had first seen. "And then he started describing this world to me: a place of machines and technology, a place of enormous structures and lands and people unlike any I had ever seen… and I believed him."

"Why?" Alex asked.

"Because I had dreamed about this place," Sleeping Beauty said. "It's complicated and even I don't understand it, but while I was under that horrible spell, I dreamed about the place he was describing. I dreamed about so many things, I had just assumed it had come from my imagination. I never mentioned a word of it to anyone, so I knew he had to be telling the truth."

"Did he ever return it?" Alex asked, desperate to know. "Did the spell work for him?"

Sleeping Beauty studied the twins' faces.

"You're from there, aren't you?" she asked. "And you're trying to find a way home."

Alex and Conner didn't have to respond; she already knew it was true. She reached under one of the pillows on the bed and withdrew a metal spindle.

The twins felt their spirits soar. There it was! The man had returned it—*the spell must have worked for him!*

"All I'm going to ask in return is that you also return it when you're done," Sleeping Beauty said, and handed it to Alex. "As I'm sure you can imagine, it has sentimental value for me."

The twins were beaming. Now they knew getting home was a possibility, that they weren't trapped in the Land of Stories forever.

"We're just a couple of strangers," Alex said. "Why are you being so kind to us?"

"There are many things that are out of my control," Sleeping Beauty said, and her smile faded again. "So I like to help as much as I can, when I can."

She stood and walked outside onto the balcony. The twins followed her.

Although the kingdom wasn't in the best condition, the view was spectacular; Alex and Conner could see the entire kingdom and parts of others. The ocean sparkled in the distance, and a beautiful waterfall could be seen in the mountains nearby. It was so beautiful, they forgot how high up they were.

"This used to be the most beautiful of all the kingdoms," Sleeping Beauty said. "The rolling green hills, the wildflowers, the rivers that used to flow… they're all just memories now. Even the natural beauty of the land was put to rest under that awful curse."

"Will things ever get better?" Alex asked.

"I certainly hope so," Sleeping Beauty said. "Can I tell you a secret?" she asked the twins, receiving eager nods. "I haven't slept since Chase awoke me with the kiss."

The twins were shocked.

"Yikes!" Conner said. "You must be exhausted."

"After sleeping for a century, I'll be quite rested for a while," Sleeping Beauty said. "I promised myself and I promised this kingdom that I wouldn't rest until it was restored to its original state. Had my parents just let me die, as the curse originally intended, none of this would have happened. So I'm prepared to spend the rest of my life, the life they ensured, making things right again."

Alex and Conner felt sorry for the young queen. They'd always been so distracted by the thought of a cursed, sleeping kingdom that they'd never thought about the responsibility a monarch would face putting it back on its feet.

"I suppose that's why the Wishing Spell has always intrigued me," Sleeping Beauty said. "It's proof that if someone wants something enough, and they're willing to work for it, they can achieve great things. I keep the spindle as a reminder that even the worst curses cast by the most powerful enchantresses can eventually be overcome."

"The kingdom is very lucky to have a queen like you," Alex said. "A weaker person would have given up."

"Try the rubber band trick," Conner told her. "I promise you won't regret it."

"I will." Sleeping Beauty smiled. "It's probably time you headed out. I may believe you, but convincing my husband and the royal advisor of your innocence won't be easy. Follow me; I know a secret way out of the castle."

The twins left the castle feeling inspired by Sleeping Beauty. The fairy tale had always romanticized the bravery of the young prince and the horror of the curse that had been cast upon the land, but it had failed to mention what a strong and brave woman the sleeping beauty truly was.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE NORTHERN KINGDOM

Alex and Conner traveled into the Northern Kingdom by boat, a first for the twins. They found a fisherman just about to travel up the river into the kingdom and persuaded him to let them come aboard. Alex said they were lost and pretended to cry. She was very convincing, too. Conner, however, was not. He tried to join in on the performance and things just became awkward. Thankfully, the fisherman allowed them to travel with him anyway.

The boat was small and flat and had just enough room for the three of them. It traveled perfectly along with the river's current, so they didn't even need to row. The twins were enjoying the ride and were able to appreciate the scenery, pointing out every riverside village they saw. It was nice to travel without fear of a wolf or an ogre running up from behind them.

The Northern Kingdom was very misty and cool; the twins could tell it was the type of place that would become freezing in the winter. The kingdom was covered with grassy fields and several bodies of water. An icy, steep mountain range bordered the north.

The boat traveled along the river and poured into *Swan Lake*, which was appropriately inhabited by many swans and other birds. Snow White's palace sat on the edge of Swan Lake. It was short but wide with tan marble walls, dark green domes, and several colorful stained glass windows, including an especially large one shaped as a bright red apple.

"What's up with all the apple tributes?" Conner asked. "Didn't the apple almost kill Snow White? Why does she have it displayed every chance she gets?"

"I suppose it's symbolic for the kingdom, like a cross in a church," Alex said, giving her best educated guess.

There were no towns or villages near the palace. It had been built away from everything else and was an isolated world of its own. It seemed like such a lonely place.

Alex had spent some time with her nose in the journal, re-reading everything she could in case she'd missed something. She put it away and began searching the shore until she finally spotted what she was looking for.

"Excuse me, sir," Alex said to the fisherman. "Can you please drop us off at that riverbank?"

The fisherman steered the boat in that direction, and the twins got off and said good-bye to him.

"Why are we getting off here?" Conner asked. "The palace is that way."

"Conner, I'm tired of explaining everything to you. *Here,*" she said, and handed him the journal. He read the pages that she had been looking over during their trip on the boat.

Snow White's palace overlooks Swan Lake, and part of the lake flows into the moat circling the palace, which works to the advantage of anyone trying to sneak into the palace unnoticed.

There is a hidden gate at the bottom of the palace that the moat runs through. It's right by the dungeon and is used to transport prisoners into and out of the palace by boat. It's easy to swim under the gate and then climb up onto the dock inside.

The glass coffin is in a large storage room that used to be the Evil Queen's private chamber on the third floor. On the second floor you'll find a large portrait of the Evil Queen herself just past

the grand staircase off the main entrance. The portrait is actually a secret door that leads up to the chamber.

Travel at night so it's difficult for anyone to spot you in the water. But note that the Swan Lake waters are very deep and can be rough after sundown. Use something as a flotation device, like a log or a piece of wood.

Alex was standing next to a log that had washed ashore on the riverbed, and she gestured down to it.

"See?" Alex said.

"Gotcha," Conner said.

The twins waited for nightfall to travel across the river to the palace. They carefully placed the log into the river and then entered the water themselves. It was unbearably cold. Conner made a high-pitched gasping sound as soon as he was waist deep.

"*Wooo!* It's so cold, I think we may be twin sisters now," he said through rattling teeth. "I don't think I've ever been this cold in my entire life!"

"Just keep thinking that we only have two more items left to collect and then we'll be home!" Alex said, shivering herself.

"Jewels from Snow White's coffin and the 'saber from the deepest sea,' " Conner repeated to himself. "Jewels from Snow White's coffin and the 'saber from the deepest sea'… Nope, I'm still cold!"

They held on to the log and drifted on the current to the palace. Having the log was a good call, since the water was very choppy, and the twins were getting tired just by holding on to it. They probably would have drowned without it.

The closer they got to the palace the more soldiers they saw marching the grounds.

"There are so many soldiers," Conner said through shivering teeth.

"It's because of the Evil Queen," Alex said. "I doubt there was this much surveillance when the man from the journal came."

The twins submerged themselves completely whenever they thought a soldier might be able to see them. They steered the log into the palace's moat, careful not to make a splash or cause too many ripples. They had to circle the palace twice, but eventually they found the secret gate.

They let go of the log and swam under the gate. It was a much deeper dive than they had thought. Conner came to the surface on the other side and was gasping for air. He treaded water for a moment, waiting for his sister to surface, but she didn't.

"Alex?" Conner asked, looking for her in the water around him. "Alex!"

Conner dove back underwater. He found Alex struggling under the gate; one of the straps on her bag had caught when she'd swum under it. She was stuck, and she desperately needed air. Conner swam down to her and yanked on her bag as hard as he could to set his sister free, but it wouldn't budge. He tugged harder, and the strap finally ripped off.

He helped Alex get to the surface. She was breathing harder than he had ever heard her breathe before. She had been seconds away from drowning.

Conner helped her over to the dock, and they both climbed on top of it. They were both so alarmed that they had forgotten how cold they were.

"Thank you…" Alex said once she had caught her breath. "That was really brave of you."

"I didn't have a choice," Conner said. "You had all the Wishing Spell items in your bag."

Alex playfully hit him, and they quietly laughed.

They were drenched, and their jaws were chattering so hard that the sound of it echoed around them.

The only way out was through a stone doorway. The twins peered inside it and saw a long hallway. At one end was a spiral staircase leading down (to the dungeon, they assumed) and at the other was a spiral staircase leading up. They chose the staircase leading up.

It led straight to another hall with a steamy odor in the air. It was very humid inside this part of the palace, and the twins soon walked by an open door and saw why.

"Look, it's the laundry room!" Alex said.

The room was full of large, steaming tubs of water, and several garments and sheets were hung up to dry around the room. It was past working hours, so the room was empty.

"I have an idea," Alex said, and darted inside the room.

"What are you doing?" Conner asked her. She started digging through a pile of what Conner hoped were clean clothes and linens.

"If the grounds outside are any indication, I bet the halls of the palace are swarming with soldiers," she said.

"And?" Conner said.

"We're going to seem very suspicious walking around soaked to the bone in our T-shirts and jeans," she explained. She pulled out two dresses and two lacy caps from the basket.

"No way," Conner said, realizing what she intended to do with them. "Absolutely not."

"Conner, put your pride aside and get dressed! We've come way too far to get caught now!" she said, pulling one of the dresses over her head.

"The guys at school can never know about this," Conner said with a very serious face.

"If your friends find out you traveled into the fairy-tale world, I doubt this would be what they were most interested in hearing about," Alex said.

The twins got dressed and looked almost identical in the same outfit. They wrapped their wet clothes and bags in towels and then carried the towels to look busy.

They journeyed higher into the palace, perfectly disguised as two maids working a night shift. The palace had beautiful marble floors and walls on the inside as well. The stained glass windows were even more beautiful with moonlight shining through them.

Alex was right: Every hall and corridor was under constant watch by soldiers. Conner was too embarrassed to look any of them in the eye. He did find a few gold coins in the pocket of his maid's uniform, however, which made him feel better.

Alex and Conner found the grand staircase in the middle of the palace. They climbed it to the second floor and began scanning the halls for a portrait of the Evil Queen. Like Cinderella's palace, there were portraits of past rulers framed on the walls and statues of all seven of the dwarfs that had helped Snow White.

"How do we know what the Evil Queen looks like?" Conner asked. "We've never seen her before."

"We'll just have to guess," Alex said. They walked past a portrait of a woman sitting in a garden. All the plants and flowers were bright around her, but she wore a long, dark gown. The woman was

beautiful, but she had a blank, cold expression on her face.

"That's her," Alex said.

There was something about the woman's eyes in the portrait that made Alex sure of it. They were beautiful, but they seemed so empty, as if all the happiness had been drained out of her soul.

Alex waited for two soldiers to leave the hall and then tried pulling on the portrait. It was stuck. She pulled harder, and still it didn't budge.

"Are you sure that's it?" Conner said.

"One hundred percent," Alex said. She gave it another good tug, and the portrait swung away from the wall like an open door. Behind the portrait was a wooden ladder that went up to the third floor.

"Nice one!" Conner said and gave his sister a high five. The twins climbed up the ladder and found the back of another secret door.

The twins entered the storage chamber from behind an exact replica of the portrait they had just gone through on the second floor. The whole room was filled with old furniture covered in white sheets and old trunks and chests. The portrait the twins had climbed through was the only painting hung on the walls; the rest were stacked in piles against the walls around the room.

The room was long and had a set of heavy double doors at one end and a raised platform with a curtain around it at the other. The twins knew without a doubt that this place was where the Evil Queen had kept her magic mirrors.

There was a large counter with tubes, vials, and glass containers. They had all been emptied out, but the twins knew it must have been where the Evil Queen had kept her poisons.

"This room gives me the creeps," Conner said. "It looks like no one has been in here for years."

"I don't see the glass coffin anywhere," Alex said. She started uncovering the furniture trying to find it, but it wasn't in the room.

"The coffin isn't here," she said, feeling a rush of panic come over her. "Let's just look around."

"Look around for what?" Conner asked.

"For anything!" yelled Alex, frustrated and upset. "Try and find anything that says where the glass coffin may have been taken."

The twins searched the room from top to bottom. They looked through all the trunks and cases but found nothing that gave any sign of where it might be. There were so many years of memories packed away in this room, it was impossible to tell what had belonged to the Evil Queen or to Snow White or to the rulers before them.

Alex was going through a stack of parchments. She found interesting handwritten letters among them that she couldn't help but read.

The first letter had masculine handwriting and said:

Dear Evly,

I love you more than a bird loves the morning sun. Every second I'm away from you is a moment wasted. I am yours forever.

Mira

The next was written by a woman and said:

Dearest Mira,

You are the last thing I think about before I sleep, and the first thing I think about when I wake, and the time in between is filled with a longing to be in your arms. My heart is yours and yours alone.

Evly

The letters between the two lovers continued; the handwriting on the next letter seemed rushed.

Evly,

It is the cruelest punishment possible to be kept from you. Not being able to touch your skin or kiss your lips has made my soul hurt. I am hollow without you. I will save you from this wickedness, I swear it.

Mira

Alex could see tiny circles on the paper: teardrops, she figured. The letters were wrinkled from having been held so tight.

Mira,

The thought of being with you again is what keeps my heart beating. Every day is a day spent searching for a way to be with you. I live for you. I love you with every breath I take.

Evly

They were short but so passionate. Alex felt her own heart beating faster after reading them. She looked for more, but found none.

"Alex," Conner said. "Come take a look at this." He was going through the paintings stacked against the wall and had found one that made his heart drop. Conner pulled a large portrait out from the stack. It was of a tall, grizzled man with a bushy, brown beard. He wore a large coat and held a crossbow.

"That must be the Evil Queen's Huntsman," Alex said.

"I bet," Conner said. "But look closer."

Alex took a second look and saw that partially hidden behind the Huntsman in the portrait was a little girl. She had bright green eyes and hair that was so dark red it seemed purple.

"It can't be," Alex said.

The twins felt sick to their stomachs. It was the woman they had seen in Red Riding Hood's castle; her features and hair color were too distinctive for it not to be.

"So… is she the Huntsman's daughter?" Conner asked.

"She must be," Alex said.

"I didn't even know he had a daughter," Conner said. "What does she want with the Wishing Spell?"

Alex thought about it. She barely knew anything about the Huntsman; she knew nothing about his daughter. While the wheels spun in her head, coming up with different possibilities, a horrifying thought came to her.

"What if she's not collecting for herself ? What if she's collecting for the Evil Queen?" Alex said.

Conner's face went white, and he shook his head.

"No!" he said. "What would she want with the Wishing Spell?"

"It makes sense," Alex said. She couldn't deny the facts. "She escaped from prison for a reason. She has something unfinished, maybe revenge or something *bigger*. Something she can't complete herself."

"What if she needs it for the same reason we do?" Conner asked. "What if she's trying to get into our world?"

The idea hadn't occurred to Alex. She looked back at the portrait of the Evil Queen on the wall. She stared at the painted face and tried to find the answers in her lifeless eyes. What could she be planning?

The twins heard a set of footsteps outside the chamber. The door was unlocked from the outside, and someone started to open it.

"Quick! Hide!" Conner said. He and Alex jumped inside one of the bigger trunks and shut the lid, leaving it open just a crack so they could still see the room.

"Your Majesty," said a booming man's voice from farther down the hall, and whoever was opening the door stopped.

"Yes, what is it?" said a woman's voice just behind the door.

"My men and I have returned," the man said. "We've searched everywhere, and there is still no sign of your stepmother."

The twins recognized his voice. It was Sir Grant, the soldier who had made the announcement about the Evil Queen in the Charming Kingdom during the ball.

"Oh?" said the woman.

"Your Highness, forgive me for asking again, but you were the last person to see her in the palace before she escaped. Are you sure there isn't anything you can tell us about that night? Any detail or clue or something she said that would give us an idea of where she was going?" Sir Grant asked.

"I've told you countless times, I don't remember anything of the sort," the woman said. "I went to simply say a few things that had been on my mind, and once I had done so, I left."

"Your Highness, it's only a matter of time before she strikes, before she poisons a river and kills half a kingdom or something worse," Grant said. "You knew her better than anyone else. For your own safety, please inform us immediately if you remember anything else."

"You will be the first I inform if any memories surface," the woman said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to be alone."

Sir Grant returned down the hall. The woman slowly turned the handle of the chamber door and

opened it. She was a beautiful woman with the darkest hair and the lightest skin the twins had ever seen.

"It's Snow White!" Alex whispered to Conner, and squeezed his arm.

She wore a white nightgown and a matching overcoat. She stood in the doorway for a moment, just looking at the room before she entered it. It seemed hard for her to be in the room where so many attempts on her life had once been planned. The way she surveyed everything around her made the twins assume she hadn't been inside this room in a very long time.

Snow White entered the room and locked the door behind her. She walked around the room and carefully went through all the things, just as the twins had done.

She went to a stack of old books. She went through the pages of one that was black and had a large skull on its cover. Snow White flipped through its pages until she let out a tiny gasp and dropped the book. The twins could see from the open book lying on the ground that she had discovered the page with the recipe for a poisoned apple.

She took a seat on the platform behind her and began crying, burying her face into her hands. The whole situation seemed to have taken a toll on the young queen.

"We should ask her where the coffin is," Alex whispered to Conner.

"Are you sure? She seems like she needs a moment," Conner said.

"Unfortunately, we don't have a moment to spare," Alex said. Alex slowly stood in the trunk and pushed open the lid. "Your Majesty?" she said softly.

Snow White gasped. She was startled and embarrassed to see that she wasn't alone.

"Who are you?" she asked. "How did you get in here?"

"Boy, if we got a nickel every time someone asked us that, we could afford our own palace to sneak into," said Conner, standing up beside his sister.

"We don't mean any harm, Ms. White, we just need to ask you a question, and then we'll be gone," Alex said.

"First, tell me how you got in here," Snow White said.

"The portrait," Conner said. "There's a secret ladder that leads down to the second floor."

"Conner, don't give away all our secrets," Alex said.

"I know that," Snow White said. "I used it when I would sneak into this room as a girl. How did you know about it?"

"We read about it somewhere," said Conner, waving his hands like the subject wasn't a big deal.

"You seem like nice children, but you shouldn't be sneaking into places where you don't belong," Snow White said. "These are very dangerous times we're living in."

"Tell me about it," Conner said with a snort.

"We completely agree and promise never to do it again," Alex said. "We were just wondering where your glass coffin might be?"

Snow White looked at them uneasily; it was such a bizarre question. "It was moved," she said.

"To where?" Conner asked.

"I gave it back to the dwarfs," Snow White said. "It was beautiful, but as you can imagine, it was strange to have that coffin in the palace. They keep it somewhere in their mines."

The twins sighed at the news. The road ahead of them had just become much longer.

"What on earth would you two want with my coffin?" Snow White asked.

They looked at each other, not sure what to tell her and what not to tell her.

"We're on a bit of a scavenger hunt," Alex said. "And we're in a bit of a time crunch, you see, because your stepmother may be after the same things we are."

Snow White looked at them very seriously. "Children, my stepmother is a very dangerous woman. If she is after something and you are in her way, she won't hesitate to kill you. She is *heartless*. If there is any possibility of you crossing paths with her, you must stop whatever you're doing immediately."

A loud banging came from the door.

"Your Majesty, are you in here?" a soldier asked. "The king couldn't find you and is concerned."

"Yes, one moment, please," Snow White said, and then turned to the twins. "You two should go."

The twins nodded and climbed up through the portrait.

"Promise you'll think about what I've said," Snow White said to them, just before they shut the portrait door.

"Of course," Alex lied.

Snow White smiled with relief and left the chamber.

The twins decided to exit the palace through the main entrance since they were still disguised as servants.

"The dwarf mines are in the Dwarf Forests, which aren't very far from here," Alex said, looking down at the map. "Remember, Snow White ran there by foot after the Huntsman failed to kill her."

"We're going *back* into the Dwarf Forests?" Conner said. "Do we have a death wish?"

"We don't have a choice," Alex said.

The twins camped out in a safe patch of woods near Snow White's palace and slept for the little night remaining. They hung their wet clothes over a tree branch to dry by the next morning.

They began their return into the Dwarf Forests. Alex's bag had only one strap now, but it worked nonetheless. They walked for a good while before they found a driver willing to give them a ride.

"Are you sure you want to go in there? It's a very dangerous place," the driver said.

"Trust us, we know," Conner said. He gave the driver the coins he had found in his maid's dress the night before to further persuade him.

The cart traveled down the path, past the Ugly Duckling Pond (which Alex found incredibly amusing), and into a forest that had been logged. For miles around there were nothing but tree stumps. It didn't make the twins sad to see all the missing trees; they had seen enough live ones recently to make up the difference.

"I really hope we don't run into the Evil Queen," Conner said during the trip. "That would just suck."

"I just hope she doesn't already have the 'saber from the deepest sea,' " Alex said. "Otherwise we may *have* to cross paths."

"I wonder if she knows about us," Conner said. "If she sent the Huntsman's daughter to find Sleeping Beauty's spindle and the Troll and Goblin kings' crown, and they both were gone, she would realize sooner or later that someone else is collecting objects for the spell."

"I hope she doesn't," Alex said, and then let out a sigh. "It seems like the longer we're here, the worse it gets for us. Something always comes up that makes things more difficult…."

Alex's face went pale, and her mouth dropped open. She looked as if she had just seen a ghost.

"What's wrong?" Conner asked. "You look like you got a B on a pop quiz."

He turned and looked in the direction of her gaze. In the distance, standing in the middle of the

field of stumps was a tree that, instead of growing straight out of the ground, was curved and wound in circles like a large vine. It was unmistakably the Curvy Tree, the one their father had told them stories about seeing when he was a kid.

"You're right, Alex," Conner said. "Things always find a way of becoming more complex."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THROUGH THE MINES

The twins didn't speak for the rest of the trip into the Dwarf Forests. They couldn't. There was too much to say and not enough words to express what they were feeling. The driver dropped them off a mile or so away from the mines, and the twins walked in silence the rest of the way.

They weren't even alarmed or threatened by the forest around them. Their minds were so full, there was no room to become nervous or timid by the thick and chilling trees around them.

"The mines are just past this hill," Alex said, looking at the map. At least now they were speaking, just not about the subject they needed to address.

The twins reached the top of the hill, and on the other side below were several tunnels leading into the side of a mountain. They were much different from the tunnels they had seen in the Troll and Goblin Territory; they were perfectly rounded and sturdy. Dozens of dwarfs were working in them, transporting wagons of jewels and rocks from one tunnel into the next.

A loud bell rang from somewhere inside the mines, and a dozen more dwarfs emerged, carrying their lanterns and picks with them. It was the end of the day, and they all headed home in single-file lines to different parts of the forest.

The twins waited on the hill for a few moments before going into the mines, making sure no one was lingering behind. They went through the largest of the tunnels and found a row of lanterns hung low on the dirt wall just inside. They each took a lantern and walked deeper into the mountainside.

The mines were huge. The shovels were lined up against the walls and the floor was covered with tracks for the dwarfs' mining carts, and stretched into the mountain for miles. The twins kept walking and walking with their lanterns raised high above them, being on careful lookout for anything that might resemble a glass coffin.

"Are we going to talk about this?" Alex asked her brother as they searched.

"Talk about the mines?" he asked.

"No. You know what I mean," Alex said.

"I don't want to talk about anything but finding the coffin," Conner said.

"Conner, ignoring the situation isn't going to help anything," Alex said.

"Ignoring what situation?" he said, not looking her in the eye. "We saw the Curvy Tree. It was just another story Dad heard and told us when we were younger. Don't make this a bigger deal than it is."

"That's not what this is, and you know it!" Alex said, raising her voice.

"Alex, stop," Conner said.

"Stop denying it!" she said.

"Alex, don't!" he said.

"You've known since the minute we got here! You felt it, too!" Alex said. "I know you did! You may be able to lie to yourself, but you can't lie to me!"

"I'm not lying! You're making things up in your head that you want to be true!" Conner said, trying to hide the tears forming in his eyes.

"All my life I felt like I was missing out on something! Like somewhere in the world there was something going on that I was supposed to be a part of! And now we've found it; it's this place! Part of us belongs here!" she said with tears streaming down her face.

"YOU CAN'T PROVE IT!" Conner said.

"CONNER, FACE IT!" Alex yelled. "DAD IS FROM HERE! HE'S FROM THE LAND OF STORIES!"

"THEN WHY DIDN'T HE TELL US?" Conner shouted, and it echoed through the mines. "WHY DID HE KEEP IT FROM US?" He sat on the ground and quietly sobbed into his hands.

Alex sat on the ground next to her brother and cried with him. It was so much to take on, so much to digest.

"Maybe he felt like he couldn't," Alex said. "He always said he would take us to the places where he grew up when we were older. We're still pretty young. Maybe he thought he would tell us when he thought we were old enough to understand."

"I think 'Hi, kids, did I ever tell you I'm from another dimension?' is pretty shocking no matter what age you are," Conner said.

"It's such a heavy thing to confess," Alex said. "He must have been waiting for the right moment. Unfortunately, the right moment didn't come until it was too late."

"So does that mean Grandma is from here, too?" Conner asked.

"I'm guessing so," Alex said.

"Then how did they get to our world? There must be more than one way besides the Wishing Spell," Conner said.

"There must be," Alex said. "But the Wishing Spell is all we've got so far, so we need to keep looking for the glass coffin if we ever want to see Mom again."

The twins dried their tears and continued their search into the mines.

"You don't think Mom is from here, too, do you?" Conner asked.

"I doubt it," Alex said. "She has photo albums of her childhood. Dad only had stories."

"Do you think she knows?" Conner asked.

"She has to," Alex said. "How could she not? They were married for more than a decade."

"Then maybe she knows where we are," Conner suggested. "Maybe she isn't as worried about us as we thought."

The twins spent another hour just walking through the mines. Conner had seen so many tunnels that he felt like his mind was starting to play tricks on him. He could have sworn he kept seeing things running around in the shadows.

"Did you see that?" he asked, paranoid.

"You're just seeing shadows," Alex said.

"Oh," Conner said. "I could have sworn it was… Never mind."

The twins found a long, miniature table with a few dozen miniature chairs around it. It looked like an area where the dwarfs took breaks from working. A large portrait of Snow White hung on the dirt wall behind it, and a glass coffin with rubies and diamonds sat against the wall underneath it.

"Bingo," Conner said. He used a pick that had been left on the table to pry a few of the jewels loose from the coffin and placed them in Alex's bag. He could see where a few had already been taken by others before them.

"That was easy," Conner said.

As soon as he turned around to face his sister, he wished he hadn't just said that.

"Conner?" Alex said, looking at her brother, who was completely petrified.

Through the dim flames of their lanterns, the twins saw a dozen humongous black wolves circling

them. They were surrounded by the Big Bad Wolf Pack. The wolves growled at the twins and gritted their teeth.

"Stay back!" Conner said, and swung the pick at them.

This didn't affect them at all. A few of them snickered.

"Are these them?" one wolf said.

"Yes," another wolf said. "We've been tracking their scent for days!"

"Hello, children," said Malumclaw, creeping toward them. "I would say, 'Nice to meet you,' but I can tell from your smell that we have crossed paths before."

"Please don't hurt us!" Alex said. She was shaking with fear and clutching on to Conner.

"Can we eat their limbs at least?" another wolf said. "*She* doesn't need their limbs? Does she?"

"She?" Alex asked. "Who is *she*?"

"We agreed we would bring them to her unharmed," Malumclaw said regretfully, looking toward the twins. "You're coming with us!"

"Conner," Alex whispered to her brother. "What are we going to do?"

"I've got an idea," Conner said. He placed his lantern on the ground and took a step closer to Malumclaw. *"Bad dog! Very bad dog! Sit!"*

The wolves and Alex all had the same exact expression on their faces. What was he doing?

"I said sit! That's a very bad dog! Go to your basket!" continued Conner, shaking his index finger at Malumclaw. Whatever he thought he was doing was failing miserably, and it was just insulting the wolves.

"I changed my mind," Malumclaw told his pack. "You can eat their limbs."

"Well, I'm out of ideas," Conner said, looking back at his sister.

"I'm not!" Alex said.

In one quick move, Alex kicked the lantern Conner had placed on the ground, and it soared across the tunnel and crashed into one of the wolves, setting him partially ablaze. The wolves rushed to help extinguish their friend. Alex grabbed Conner's hand, and they ran farther down the tunnel, going deeper into the mines.

"After them!" Malumclaw commanded, and the remaining members of the pack chased after them.

The twins ran as fast as they could. They only had one lantern left, so they were practically in the dark. They could hear the wolves stampeding behind them. Their howls were unbearably loud as they echoed down the tunnel. The tunnel began to descend, making it nearly impossible for the twins to run.

"Jump in there!" Conner said, pointing to a mine cart on a track.

"No way!" Alex said, but Conner picked her up and plopped her inside. He jumped inside himself and pulled the brake lever, and the cart began traveling down the tunnel at a rapid speed.

A few of the wolves swiped at them with their claws. The twins ducked down as far as they could in the cart, but not before one of them reached Conner and left a bloody scratch on his forearm. Alex kicked another right in the snout, and it whimpered away. Another wolf barely missed the twins with his claws but knocked the brake lever right off the cart.

The cart gained speed, and soon they were outrunning the wolves.

"We're doing it! We're getting away!" said Conner, holding his hand over his wounded arm.

"I wouldn't celebrate just yet if I were you!" Alex said. She pointed to a sign ahead that said:

"That's not good!" Conner yelled, wishing for the lever to somehow grow back on their cart.

The cart began speeding faster down the tunnel as it descended at a steeper angle. They were going so fast—*too fast!* They could barely open their eyes with the air rushing by their faces. The track turned and dipped deeper into the mountain. The twins were afraid they were going to fly out of the cart if it didn't fly right off the track first. It was the scariest roller coaster they had ever been on.

"This would be awesome if it weren't for the fear of death!" Conner shouted. He was even tempted to put his hands up, but he knew it wasn't an appropriate time.

The cart zoomed through the mines, showing no sign of slowing down. In a matter of seconds, the twins' greatest fear had gone from being eaten alive by wolves to crashing in a dwarf mine. The track led them through a giant cave with stalactites pointing toward stalagmites and a large pool of water at the very bottom.

To the twins' horror, they passed another sign, which said:

DEAD END

It appeared an avalanche of rocks had fallen on the track many years before, and now the twins were speeding toward the solid wall of rock that had formed there. The twins ducked as low as they could in the mine cart, bracing themselves for the traumatic injuries they were about to receive.

The cart slammed against the rocks. It violently rattled as it broke through the wall. A few rocks fell into the cart and onto the twins. Alex screamed, and Conner covered his head as much as possible with his arm. Just when they thought they were surely about to die, the cart slowly came to a stop.

The twins peeked around from inside the cart. They were outside, somewhere in the Dwarf Forests, on the other side of the mountain.

"I cannot believe we just survived that," Conner said. They were pretty banged-up, but they climbed out of the cart not seriously injured for the most part.

They didn't waste a minute questioning their luck. The twins ran from the cart into the trees.

"We've got to get out of here," Alex said. "It won't be long before the wolves find us again!"

"Who were they talking about? Who were they going to bring us to?" Conner asked.

"I'm afraid to even say it—*Aaaaaahhhh!*" Alex screamed.

They hadn't been in the forest for even a minute when they both felt brutal blows to the backs of their heads. They fell to the ground, slowly losing consciousness.

Right before they passed out completely, the twins saw the faces of Bobblewart the troll and Egghorn the goblin looking down at them, each holding a club in his hand.

The twins woke up with splitting headaches. They were bound together with rope in the back of a

very familiar cart.

"Hey, Egghorn, look who's waking up," Bobblewart said.

"The little thieves have arisen," Egghorn said.

The goblin and troll were driving the same exact cart, but it was being pulled by a different donkey; the previous one had most likely been used to death. They kept Alex's bag between them as they traveled down the road. Alex and Conner fought against the ropes, but they were tied with triple knots around their hands and feet.

"Where are we?" Conner asked.

Alex strained her neck looking up out of the cart but managed to recognize some familiar trees.

"We're back where they caught us the first time!" Alex said. "We must have been knocked out for an entire day!"

"Would you like us to make it two days?" asked Egghorn, raising his club.

"This can't be happening again," Conner said. "You can't enslave us again! We told the fairies about you!"

"Oh, yes, we know," Bobblewart said.

"They came and gave us all very long lectures about it," Egghorn said.

"And they shut off all of our tunnels, thanks to you!" Bobblewart said angrily. "Now we have to take the long way into our territory!"

"Then let us go!" Conner said.

"Not this time," Egghorn said. "You stole our kings' crown while in our kingdom. According to the Happily Ever After Assembly's rules, we have every right to bring you back into our kingdom and charge you for your crime."

"It's gonna be one heck of a trial!" Bobblewart said. "Every troll and goblin will be there!"

"And we've already scheduled you for beatings after the trial is over! Everyone in the territory will get a turn!" Egghorn said, and he and the troll howled with laughter.

Conner stayed calm about the matter. He raised his tied hands just over the side of the cart. The scratch on his arm was still healing, and he stretched so a few drops of his blood fell from his wound and onto the ground as they traveled.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked him.

"I'm leaving a trail," Conner said.

She didn't know what to think of this, but she trusted him. Whatever he was doing, he had a plan.

A few hours later, the twins had managed to shift themselves up into a seated position. The troll and the goblin continued entertaining themselves by predicting the horrible things the twins would go through once they got back to the Troll and Goblin Territory.

Conner began seeing dark figures running between the trees in the distance like he had seen in the cave.

"Get ready," Conner said. "They're here."

Alex mentally prepared herself for whatever was about to happen. "That was faster than I expected," she said.

A small howl came from the trees. Egghorn and Bobblewart pulled on their donkey's reins and ordered it to stop. The cart came to a halt.

"Did you hear that?" Egghorn asked.

"Yeah, I did," Bobblewart said.

They both pulled out their clubs and hopped off the cart, circling it for a moment.

"Over there!" Bobblewart said. "I see something!"

The troll and the goblin took off into the trees.

"Help me get to my bag!" Alex said to her brother. They began inching toward the front of the cart. Alex got ahold of her school bag with her teeth and dragged it into the back with them. It landed right by her tied hands, and she managed to open it and pull out Cinderella's glass slipper, almost spraining her wrist in the process.

"What are you doing?" Conner asked her.

"Something that is going to hurt my soul and make me hate myself for the rest of my life," Alex said. She forcefully hit the slipper against the floor of the cart and broke it into three pieces. She used one of the shards to cut her and her brother loose.

"Whoa," Conner said. "Never in a million years did I think you would do that! That was pretty gangster."

"We can glue it back together, right?" Alex said, trying to frantically put the glass slipper back together like a puzzle.

"It'll still work for the Wishing Spell, won't it?" Conner asked.

"The spell never said it had to be in one piece," Alex said.

They put the pieces of the slipper into Alex's bag and jumped out of the cart. They ran into the forest in the opposite direction than the troll and the goblin had gone. A few moments later, they heard spine-chilling screams and howls as the troll and the goblin were attacked by the Big Bad Wolf Pack.

The horrible sounds made the twins run faster. They knew it would be only a matter of seconds before the wolves picked up on their scents and would be right behind them. They didn't even know where they were going; they just knew they had to get somewhere safe as fast as possible.

Alex was eyeing the forest around them. There was a deep roar coming from close by. Could they be near the ocean?

"We're farther south than I thought!" Alex said. "I think we may be back in the Fairy Kingdom!"

"Then let's find a fairy who can turn these wolves into Chihuahuas!" Conner said. He turned back, and in the distance behind them he could see several wolves running toward them at full speed. A moment later, the twins saw the wolves running slightly ahead of them to both their right and their left, gaining ground and preparing for the attack.

The twins ran through a set of thick trees and then came to a sudden and jarring stop. They were standing on the edge of a very high cliff overlooking the ocean.

"How'd we get to the ocean so fast?" Conner yelled.

"Look," Alex said. "It's Mermaid Bay! We're somewhere between the Fairy Kingdom and the Sleeping Kingdom."

Conner looked behind them. The wolves were only a few feet away from pouncing on them.

"No, it looks like we're somewhere between death and dying!" Conner said. "Alex, I'm really sorry about this!"

"Sorry about wha—*ahhhhhh!"* Alex screamed.

Conner pushed his sister and himself off of the cliff seconds before they would have been tackled by the wolves. They were falling so fast that they couldn't breathe or hear each other's screams. All they could hear was the air rushing past them.

The twins plummeted into the ocean. The wolves stayed on top of the cliff for a few minutes,

waiting for them to surface in the water, but they saw nothing. The twins were gone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GOLDILOCKS, WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE

It was just before sundown, and soldiers from the Corner Kingdom were hot on Goldilocks's trail. She had been spotted on the outskirts of Baker's Village in the early afternoon, and had been on the run ever since. A group of twenty men were right behind her on their horses, determined to take her into custody by any means necessary. Lucky for her, Goldilocks had the fastest horse in all the kingdoms.

"Come on, Porridge," Goldilocks said to her horse. "You can make it, girl. We're almost to the border."

They passed Rapunzel's tower and crossed into the Dwarf Forests, but the soldiers kept chasing her. In doing so, they were breaking laws that the Happily Ever After Assembly had enacted, but then again, Goldilocks had broken so many laws she had lost count, so she doubted the soldiers would experience any repercussions for it.

Porridge had an advantage over the other horses, since she knew the Dwarf Forests by heart. She and Goldilocks gained a lot of ground from knowing what was behind every tree and which paths led where.

"Split up and find her!" Goldilocks heard one of the soldiers order from behind her.

Goldilocks could feel her horse getting tired. They had been running for hours, and she knew Porridge needed a break soon if they were going to stay on the run any longer.

They came across an abandoned barn that was partially hidden by trees. Goldilocks had often used this place to hide from anyone hot on her trail.

"Porridge, I'm going to hide in here and wait it out," Goldilocks told her loyal horse. "Find someplace safe and rest. Meet me back here tomorrow at sunrise."

Porridge nodded and galloped away. Goldilocks withdrew her sword and approached the barn. The door was off its hinges; it looked like someone or something had forced its way in recently.

The inside of the barn was a disaster. Stacks of hay were knocked over, stables were broken down into nothing but bits of broken wood, and there were bloodstains on the floor and walls. But thankfully, whatever had caused this damage wasn't here anymore.

Goldilocks put away her sword. She wasn't intimidated by the barn in the slightest; she had seen much worse, had been through much worse, and had caused much worse in her days on the run.

She took off her long coat and her sword, and began unlacing her tall boots, getting ready to settle in for the night. Something colorful caught her eye while she was doing so. A bright blue fabric was sticking out from the bottom of a stack of hay.

Goldilocks pulled it out from under the haystack and examined it. It was a beautiful bright blue gown with delicate stitching. It reminded Goldilocks of a dress she had owned when she was a girl. It had been so long since the last time she'd worn a dress.

She discovered a mirror hanging on the barn wall. It was slightly tilted and had cracks on the bottom half, but she could still see her reflection perfectly. She didn't like what she saw. Goldilocks was young, but she had aged so much since the last time she had seen her reflection so clearly. She was a full-grown woman now.

Goldilocks undressed and put on the blue dress. She let her hair down and ruffled it up a bit. She

wiped off all the dirt on her face with a handkerchief and looked in the mirror again. She stared at herself, completely awestruck; she had forgotten how beautiful she could be. She only wished Jack could see her looking like this.

"Such beauty, such a waste," said a voice.

In the blink of an eye, Goldilocks had retrieved her sword and extended it in front of her.

"Who's there?" Goldilocks demanded, but she didn't see anyone else in the barn.

"If only the world could see what I see now: Goldilocks, a woman feared throughout all the kingdoms, standing vulnerably in a dress," said the voice.

"Don't be a coward. Show yourself!" Goldilocks said. She turned back to the mirror, but didn't see her reflection. Another woman, with a pale face and in a dark, hooded cloak, was staring back at her.

"Hello, Goldilocks," said the woman in the mirror.

"You!" Goldilocks said. There was only one woman in the world who could possibly have the ability to communicate from mirror to mirror. "I know you. You're the queen everyone is looking for."

"Yes," the Evil Queen said. "We're both women on the run."

"What do you want with me?" Goldilocks said.

"Why do you assume I need something from you?" the Evil Queen said. "I've appeared to you simply to pass along some information I've recently acquired."

"Nice try, but I'm not some ditzy maiden you can con," said Goldilocks, getting closer to the mirror. "Try giving *me* a poisoned apple, and I'll shove it down your throat."

"No, of course not," the Evil Queen said in a mocking tone. "You're just poor little Goldilocks, a girl who was tricked into thinking she was going on a date with the boy she loved, and has been running from the law ever since."

Goldilocks stepped away from the mirror. "How do you know that?" she asked with intensity in her eyes.

"I know more about you than anyone," the Evil Queen said. "I know that when you were a young girl, you received a handwritten letter from a young boy you loved named Jack. He asked you to meet him at a house a little way out of town and gave instructions on how to get there. You went to the house and waited and waited for hours, but he never showed up."

"How do you know all this?" Goldilocks asked.

"You became sleepy in that house, didn't you?" the Evil Queen continued. "So you decided to go to sleep in one of the beds and hoped you'd wake to find him. But you didn't wake to him, did you? You woke to find three bears staring down at you, and they almost killed you. You barely escaped the house alive, but the bears pressed charges against you anyway for breaking into their home and, being young and scared, you ran. You ran and have been running ever since.

"For years you wondered how Jack could have done that to you. How could he have framed you like that? And then finally one night you snuck into the Red Riding Hood Kingdom and asked him. But Jack told you he'd grown up poor and illiterate; he hadn't sent you the letter because he never learned to write. Someone *else* did. Someone *else* framed you.

"Jack had been looking for you for years. He was devastated when you disappeared. He even climbed a beanstalk looking for you. You two have been meeting covertly in the shadows for almost a decade now."

"Who told you that?" Goldilocks asked.

“Every driven person comes from a mountain of pain they wish to keep hidden,” the Evil Queen said. “I did my research on you, Goldilocks, and you and I aren’t so different. Except, I know who wrote you that letter.”

Goldilocks shook her head in disbelief. How could she know something Goldilocks had been trying to discover her entire life?

“And who might that be?” she asked.

“Red Riding Hood, of course,” the Evil Queen said.

“What?” Goldilocks said. She almost stopped breathing.

“It’s true,” the Evil Queen said. “The young queen has a large mirror in her bedroom and talks in her sleep. You’d be appalled by the things she confesses in her nightmares.”

Goldilocks had to sit down. She didn’t even feel human anymore; she felt like an entity made of pure anger.

“Red Riding Hood has always loved Jack, and you were standing in the way,” the Evil Queen said. “She was young when she wrote the letter. She had no idea what the consequences would be. She thought you would leave brokenhearted before the bears got home, and then Jack would be hers.”

“But she’s had years and years’ worth of opportunities to make things right,” Goldilocks said. Her eyes were staring down at the ground, but she was blind with rage. She stood up, threw off the blue gown, and redressed in her own clothes, sword and all.

“What will you do now that you know the truth?” the Evil Queen asked.

“I’m going to take Red on a trip,” Goldilocks said. “And she’s not coming back.”

“There’s only one place where she can disappear forever…” the Evil Queen said, and her reflection faded from the mirror.

Goldilocks burst out of the barn and ran into the night, whistling for her horse. She was about to do exactly what the Evil Queen wanted, but, more important, she was about to get her long-overdue revenge.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE MERMAID'S MESSAGE

Conner was positive he was dead. The fall into the ocean must have killed him because, wherever he was, he had never been so relaxed. He felt like he was somewhere in the glorious state between being asleep and being awake, a place he knew very well. His eyes were closed, and he was lying down on the softest surface he had ever laid on in his entire life.

The air was cool and refreshing. It smelled a little salty, but he was sure he was only imagining that because the last thing he had seen was the ocean. He opened his eyes a tiny bit and saw his sister lying next to him. She must have died, too, but she seemed so peaceful that he didn't worry about her. He couldn't have worried about anything if he'd tried. He felt so wonderful that, wherever he was, all he could feel was enjoyment. *We must be in heaven*, he thought.

Conner opened his eyes wider. His vision was a little blurry, but he could see so many colorful objects moving in all different directions above him. They looked human the more his eyes adjusted. *They must be angels*, he told himself, and went back to sleep.

Just as he drifted off, a thought occurred to him: Do you sleep when you're dead? Do you feel and smell the air around you? He must have been alive after all to be experiencing all these things. But where was he? He opened his eyes as wide as possible, so they would adjust faster.

He and his sister were lying in a large clamshell at the bottom of the ocean. They were in an underwater cave of sorts, but they were able to breathe in a large air bubble that surrounded them. There were coral pillars in the cave with dark, rocky walls behind them. A sandy floor was underneath them, and they were facing an endless blue ocean.

Swimming around the top of the bubble was a gathering of mermaids. They were gorgeous and colorful. All of them were pale but had long hair that matched their tails in vibrant sea colors; there were blues and greens, purples and pinks. They were friendly and waved at Conner as soon as they noticed he was awake.

Conner looked down at his wounded arm and saw a seaweed bandage covering his scratch. One of them must have wrapped it.

"Alex!" Conner said. "Alex, wake up!" He tapped her on the shoulder, and she stirred to life.

"Hmm?" asked Alex, who was in an extremely relaxed state of her own.

"Mermaids!" Conner said. "There are mermaids swimming around us!"

This caught Alex's attention, and her eyes fluttered open. It took her a few moments to realize where she was and that it was actually happening.

She sat straight up on the clam. "Conner, why are we at the bottom of the ocean?"

"Beats me," he said. "Check out this bubble around us!" He noticed that the longer they stayed in it, the smaller it became as they breathed in the air.

"The last thing I remember is being chased by wolves and then you—*you jerk!*" she said, remembering being pushed off the cliff. She hit him repeatedly with open hands.

"Hey hey hey, stop it! It was either that or be attacked by wolves! Pick your poison!" Conner said.

"If we survived the fall, how did we get down here?" Alex asked.

"We brought you here," said a mermaid swimming above them. She had long, soft, turquoise hair that matched the shimmering scales on her tail. "The Sea Foam Spirit wants to speak with you."

"The Sea Foam Spirit?" Conner asked.

"She's on her way!" said another mermaid with pink hair and a pink tail.

"I don't think these mermaids get out much," Conner whispered to Alex.

"Here she comes now!" said a mermaid of purple coloring.

Sure enough, a cluster of sea foam drifted through the ocean toward Conner and Alex. It came into their bubble and swirled around before hovering in front of them. It slowly morphed to the shape of a mermaid.

"Hello, children," said an airy voice from inside the sea foam.

"Hello," Alex said, tilting her head like a puppy looking at something peculiar.

"Howdy," said Conner, tensing every muscle in his forehead.

"I hope you are well," the sea foam spirit said. She was frothy, and her foam was constantly rejuvenating itself. "I instructed my mermaids to take very good care of you. You poor things nearly drowned when you fell into the ocean."

Alex gave her brother a really dirty look. "Did we?" she said. "Are you the Sea Foam Spirit?"

"Yes," the spirit said. "But you and your brother may know me best as the Little Mermaid."

Alex's face lit up. This was one person she hadn't thought she would meet in the Land of Stories.

"You're the Little Mermaid?" she asked, completely enthralled.

"Good lord, what happened to you?" Conner asked.

"I thought you died," Alex said.

"Not exactly," the spirit said. "When I was turned into a human by the Sea Witch all those years ago, I had to marry the prince in order for the spell to last. Unfortunately, as everyone knows, the prince married someone else, and my body turned into sea foam. I'm no longer of physical form, but my spirit lives on."

"That's weird," Conner said.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Alex said. "I was always so sad after reading your story. Not many people know your *real* story; they always assume you had a happily-ever-after."

"There are many who don't," the spirit said. "I believe you two are looking for something that once belonged to me."

"I don't think so," Conner said.

"Wait, do you mean the 'saber from the deepest sea'?" Alex asked anxiously. "Do you know what it is?"

"How do you know we're looking for it?" Conner asked suspiciously.

"I know many things the average entity doesn't," the spirit said. "Especially things said or felt near water."

"Swan Lake!" Alex said. "We were talking about the Wishing Spell items we had left to collect while we were traveling across Swan Lake."

"So, Ms.-Foam-Lady-formerly-known-as-the-Little-Mermaid," Conner said. "What is the 'saber from the deepest sea'? We've been trying to figure it out since we got here."

"As you recall, I traded my ability to speak to the Sea Witch for a pair of legs so I could be with the prince onshore," the spirit said. "After he fell in love with the other woman, my sisters traded their hair for a knife from the Sea Witch. She said that if I killed the prince with it, I could return to the sea as a mermaid, but ultimately I couldn't go through with it and became what I am today."

"The knife!" Alex said eagerly. "The 'saber from the deepest sea' is the knife the Sea Witch gave

you! Of course! I was expecting it to be much bigger!"

"Yes," the spirit said.

"Hold up," Conner said. "You went through all that trouble for a *guy*? Were there not any available mermen?"

"Perhaps that is the lesson of my story," the spirit said.

"And where is the knife now?" Alex asked.

"I gave it to a man, not too long ago, who needed it for the same reason you do now," the spirit said. "I gave it to him on one condition: that he destroy it after he finished with it."

"Oh no," Conner said, putting his hands on his head and pulling his hair.

"So, it's gone?" Alex asked, about to cry.

"It is gone, but it isn't destroyed," the spirit said. "The man failed to fulfill his agreement, fearing that he might need it again someday."

"So where did he put it?" Conner asked.

"It's in a place where people put things they never want to see again," the spirit said.

"He flushed it?" Conner asked.

"No, remember that place the Traveling Tradesman was telling us about?" Alex said. "He must have dropped it in the Thornbush Pit!"

"Oh, great!" Conner said sarcastically. "Why did he have to drop it into a cursed pit? Why couldn't he have just dropped it in a gopher hole?"

"We're never going to get it," Alex said. "If we even get close to that place the vines and thornbush will drag us to the bottom of the pit forever."

"Unless you have these," the foam spirit said. She extended both of her hands, and two necklaces, each with a golden shell, appeared in them. "Wear these while you retrieve the knife from the bottom of the Thornbush Pit, and the cursed plants will not harm you."

"Thank you," Alex said.

The twins leaned forward to take the shells out of her foamy hands, but the spirit pulled them away. "I will only give you these if you promise to destroy the knife as soon as you're done with it," the spirit said.

The twins looked at each other and nodded.

"Of course," Alex said.

"No problem," Conner said.

"Very well," the spirit said, and handed them over to the twins. "Be careful, though. The shells are twins, too. If one breaks, the other shell will as well. Remember that."

"Why are you doing this for us?" Alex asked.

"Why do you always ask what someone's motives are when they help you?" the spirit asked.

The question took Alex off guard. "Because people don't really help each other where we come from," Alex said. "They do occasionally, but it's rarely without reason. Good people are hard to find."

"It can't be too difficult. I'm looking at two now," the spirit said. "Which is why I was inclined to help you, and which is why I am also inclined to tell you this: You are not the only ones after the Wishing Spell."

"We know," Conner said. "The Evil Queen is, too."

"She's the one who sent the wolves after us," Alex said, "isn't she?"

“Yes,” the spirit said. “She is as determined to find the knife as you are. That is why you must hurry if you are going to beat her to it. Unfortunately, the Wishing Spell can only be used once more.”

“What?” Conner said. Both the twins felt like someone had kicked them in the stomach. This definitely complicated matters. “You mean, if she gets to the knife first, that’s it, game over?”

“Unfortunately so,” the spirit said.

The bubble around the twins was almost gone. It barely covered the clam they sat in. Their time underwater was running out.

“We can’t let that happen,” Alex said, shaking her head. “We have to get there first! We have to go right now!”

“I’ll have my mermaids escort you there as fast as they can, but once you are on land, you must travel the rest of the way on your own,” the spirit said. “Stay safe, children.”

The Sea Foam Spirit fizzled out and disappeared. The mermaids swam down to the twins and each grabbed hold of the clamshell Alex and Conner sat in. Together they moved the twins through the ocean, on to their next adventure.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE THORNBUSH PIT

The mermaids escorted the twins through the ocean and up a river into the northern part of the Sleeping Kingdom. Alex and Conner were only a few miles away from the Thornbush Pit and began their walk to the place where they would find the last Wishing Spell item.

"How do we get the Wishing Spell to work once we find the knife?" Conner asked.

"I think we just put all the items together and let them do the rest," Alex said.

"I suppose," Conner said.

The land was dead and dry around them. The roads were bumpy and covered in stone. It was by far the least attractive area they had been to in all of the Land of Stories.

"I don't know about you, but I am so looking forward to getting out of this place," Conner said.

"I know what you mean," Alex said halfheartedly. "I miss Mom so much."

"I can't wait to get back to air conditioning and television," Conner said. "Boy, have I missed those things. And *food*—don't get me started about food!"

"I bet we have so much homework to catch up on, too," Alex said happily.

Conner grunted. "I didn't think about that." He also wondered if he would have to serve all those detentions when he got home as well. Would being trapped in the fairy-tale world for a week or two get him out of it?

Alex completely sympathized with her brother. She had been so excited to discover the Land of Stories, but they had had so many treacherous experiences that even she was anxious to get home. But now, looking around at the land, even as ugly as this part of the kingdom was, she couldn't help but think how much she was going to miss it.

"We have seen some amazing things," Alex said.

"Very true," Conner said.

"And we have met some extraordinary people," she said.

"Can't deny that," Conner said, shaking his head.

"It's a shame that we can't come and go to this place as we please," Alex said. "You don't think you'll miss it just a tiny bit?"

Conner immediately shook his head, and his mouth positioned into the shape to say, "No," but when he thought about it more, he hesitated. "We've had our moments," Conner said. "We're definitely leaving with memories no one else will have. Think about all the stories we'll be able to tell our kids someday."

"Right," Alex said, but this only made her think about their father.

Without realizing it, being in the Land of Stories had filled the emptiness they were left with when their dad died. Discovering that their dad was from the fairy-tale world had been the most meaningful part of the adventure.

"Mom and Grandma are going to have so much explaining to do," Conner said.

"For sure," Alex agreed. "I wonder where Dad lived."

"We'll find out," Conner said, and smiled. "I wonder if he knew any of the people that we've met or seen? I wonder if we have *family* here!"

Alex stopped walking. Her eyes grew almost as big as her open mouth.

"What if we're related to the Charming or White Dynasties?" Alex proclaimed excitedly.

"Or maybe we're one-sixtieth ogre or elf or something cool!" Conner said.

The idea gave them a new boost in their step.

They finally reached the Thornbush Pit and stopped dead in their tracks—it was a frightening sight. It was extremely wide and incredibly deep and filled to the top with plants, some dead and some alive. The vines and thornbush moved around like thousands of snakes; the pit was alive and hungry. Ruins of an old castle sat on the edge of the pit, consisting of nothing but a few walls and a stony staircase that led to nowhere.

"We're actually going in there?" Conner said.

"Let's put on our shells," Alex said.

They each tied a shell necklace around their necks and slowly walked to the edge of the pit. The vines and thornbush shot straight toward them like a frog's tongue to a fly, but then jolted back, repelled by the magic shells.

"Looks like they work," Conner said.

They began to climb down into the pit. They used the dead thornbush on the side of the pit as a ladder, scratching themselves and drawing blood on different parts of their bodies every few feet. The thornbush and vines that were alive moved away from the twins as they passed. They watched them like hungry serpents, ready to strike at any second.

Alex and Conner climbed as low as they could go. The pit floor was covered in rubbish, like a giant junkyard. The smell was unbearable, and the twins had to cover their noses as they searched.

"Whoa," Conner said. "This is like a massive trash bin. Can you imagine all the secrets we could discover just by going through this place?"

"Remember what we're here for," Alex said, and then suddenly screamed.

"What is it?" Conner asked.

She had almost stepped on the hand of a skeleton.

"Who is that?" Conner said. "Or should I say who *was* that?"

"I don't want to know," said Alex, shaken up by the discovery. "I've never seen a skeleton before."

It was only the first of dozens. There were skeletons and parts of skeletons everywhere. Each one was harder to look at than the one before; some had been down here longer than others. Alex had to take deep breaths to prevent herself from getting sick.

They found countless knives and daggers and swords scattered across the pit.

"Is this it?" Conner asked, holding up one for his sister to see.

"No, that's wooden," Alex said.

"What about this?" he asked, holding up another.

"No, that's made of steel," Alex said. "Remember, it was made in the ocean."

"Oh," Conner said. "Like *this*!"

He held up a knife that matched his sister's description perfectly. It had a curved handle that was made of coral and bits of shell, and a long blade made of bright sea glass.

"That has to be it!" Alex said gleefully. "Conner, we did it! We found the last Wishing Spell item!"

She gave her brother a huge bear hug and kissed him on the cheek. They were so incredibly happy, tears formed in their eyes. They were going home!

"Let's get out of this pit as fast as possible," Conner said. "It gives me the creeps."

The twins went back to the dead thornbush and began climbing up the side of the pit.

When they were about two thirds of the way up, a branch caught hold of Conner's necklace and ripped it off his neck. As if it were happening in slow motion, Conner saw the shell begin to fall away from him toward the bottom of the pit. He reached for it, but it was too late. It was gone. The shell hit the bottom of the pit floor and shattered.

Alex and Conner looked down at the broken shell and then looked at each other with the same horrified expression.

"Oops," Conner whispered.

The living vines and thornbush vibrated with excitement. The shells were useless now. Vines began shooting toward the twins.

"We've got to get out of here!" Alex yelled, and the twins rushed up the side of the pit faster than they had ever climbed anything before.

Their fingertips were just about to reach the top of the pit when vines wrapped themselves around Alex's and Conner's feet and dragged them downward. Conner stabbed the saber into the ground outside the mouth of the pit, and he and his sister held on to it while they were being pulled, determined not to end up like the other victims of the vines.

More vines wrapped themselves around the twins, increasing the fight. Alex and Conner were nearly completely covered in plants. Alex lost her grip around the knife and began to fall back into the pit, but Conner grabbed hold of her just in time. He couldn't hold on to both for much longer. One by one his fingers began slipping from the knife's handle.

Conner's hand lost its grip on the knife, and he and his sister were both dragged away. But right as his hand slipped away, he felt a cold, clammy hand grab on to his and try to pull him and his sister out of the pit. It was a struggle; the plants weren't giving up. Alex and Conner felt like the rope in a game of tug-of-war.

"Damn you, miserable plants!" said a very proper voice that the twins recognized. "Let them go, you overly advanced shrubbery!"

With one final tug, most of the vines broke, and Alex and Conner were saved. Their momentum piled them on top of whoever had just saved them.

"Froggy!" Alex declared, and gave their old friend a tremendous embrace.

"It's you!" Conner said. Although he had had trouble shaking Froggy's hand when they'd first met him, Conner was now hugging him like he was a long-lost relative.

"Hello, Conner, Alex," Froggy said. He was almost suffocated by their affection.

"You saved our lives!" Alex said.

"How did you know we were here?" Conner asked.

Froggy got to his feet, straightened the tie of his suit, and helped the twins up.

"I've been looking for you two for days!" Froggy said. "The amount of ground you've covered is remarkable! Thank goodness I crossed paths with those mermaids, or I would never have found you!"

"I'm so proud of you," Alex said. "You're out of your house! You're out in the world!"

"What made you come out of your hole in the ground?" Conner said.

"The Fairy Godmother is looking for you two," Froggy said.

The twins were very surprised and confused to hear this.

"What?" Conner said. "What does *she* want with us?"

"Oh no," Alex said. "The glass slipper! She must know I broke it and is furious!"

"Glass slipper?" Froggy said with a raised eyebrow equivalent.

Alex shyly looked around. "Well, yes," she said. "We've been busy collecting." She opened her bag and let Froggy peer into it.

"You've collected all the Wishing Spell items? Already?" Froggy asked. He wasn't sure whether to be proud or shocked.

"Yup," Conner said, pulling the knife out of the ground. "And believe me, it wasn't easy."

"We've got the very last item!" Alex said happily. "We can go home!"

Froggy was speechless. These two children had done something he had only dreamed about doing for years.

"That's extraordinary, children," Froggy said, but his happy expression deflated to a worried one. "But you can't go home yet."

"Why not?" Alex asked.

"Yeah," Conner said. "Why not?"

Froggy was the one who had introduced them to the Wishing Spell in the first place. Why was he saying they couldn't use it now?

"I promised the Fairy Godmother that I would bring you to her," Froggy said. "And in exchange, she said that she would turn me back into my human form. Please, you must let me take you to her."

The twins could tell that he didn't want to ask this of them but was desperately hoping they would agree.

"Froggy, you have no idea what we've been through to get all these items," Alex said.

"We want to go home," Conner added. "Now."

"We want to help," Alex said. "But what if the Fairy Godmother takes away some of the items that we've—how do I say this?—*forcefully borrowed*?"

"Then we'd be stuck here again for who knows how long," Conner said.

Froggy looked ashamed of himself. "I understand, children. Forgive me; I wasn't expecting you to have assembled all the Wishing Spell items so soon." He tried to cover his disappointment with a fake smile. "Can I help you assemble the Wishing Spell, then?"

Alex and Conner each looked to the other, feeling incredible guilty. They wanted to get home more than anything, but how could they tell him no? He had done so much for them.

"I suppose sticking around for another day wouldn't be so bad," Conner said, knowing his sister was thinking the exact same thing.

"It would be a shame to end our journey *here*," Alex said.

"Children, you can't stay for me," Froggy said. "You've got everything you need. Please don't let me stop you!"

"We'd still be lost somewhere in the Dwarf Forests without you, Froggy," Alex said.

"And if the Fairy Godmother tries to take our stuff, we'll just run like crazy away from her," Conner said. "We've gotten so good at it! You've got to see us in action!"

Froggy's big round eyes became more watery than usual. "Children, you are the kindest souls I have ever been fortunate enough to meet."

The twins smiled at him. Doing this for him made them feel better than they had felt in their entire stay in the Land of Stories.

"Where to?" Alex asked him.

Suddenly, a piercing scream sounded across the land. All three of them jerked their heads toward

it.

"Let me go!" a woman screamed.

"What's going on?" Alex asked.

Soon they heard a galloping horse approaching and felt the *thump*s of its hooves through the ground. Coming toward them at full speed from the distance was a familiar cream-colored horse.

"It's Porridge!" Conner said. "And Goldilocks!"

Goldilocks and Porridge were charging toward the Thornbush Pit—*and they were dragging Queen Red Riding Hood behind them!*

The twins and Froggy all stood motionless at the sight of it. They thought their eyes were playing tricks on their brains.

"Do you see this, too? Or am I imagining it?" Conner asked.

"I order you to release me at once!" Red Riding Hood said. Her dress was so big and layered that she wasn't harmed from being dragged, but she was extremely aggravated. "Do you have any idea what my soldiers are going to do to you once they catch you?"

"Oh, shut up, you red-hooded harlot!" Goldilocks said.

She and Porridge stopped a short distance from the twins and Froggy. Goldilocks hopped down and then dragged Red Riding Hood past them to the Thornbush Pit. She vaguely recognized the twins.

"I remember you," Goldilocks said.

"Hi there," Alex said.

"Do you need a hand?" Conner asked.

"Nope," Goldilocks said. "Just taking out the trash."

"What are you three doing just standing there?" Red screamed. "Help me!"

"I said *silence*, you basket-carrying bimbo!" Goldilocks said, and dragged her closer to the pit.

"What's going on?" Alex asked, and she, Conner, and Froggy followed them, not sure how or who to help.

"This lunatic broke down one of my kingdom's gates and rode her horse all the way into my throne room, lassoed me, and has dragged me all the way here!" Red said. "And now she's going to kill me!"

"Yes, I am!" Goldilocks said.

"Wait, why are you going to kill Queen Red Riding Hood?" Froggy asked.

"Because she's mental!" said Red.

"She knows why!" Goldilocks said.

They reached the edge of the pit, and the twins grew very nervous that they were about to witness a murder.

"They'll hang you for this!" Red shouted.

"They won't be able to prove anything," Goldilocks said. "They'll never find your body!"

Goldilocks stood Red up on her own two feet. She was still tied up, and Goldilocks began aggressively pushing her toward the pit's edge.

"Please don't do this!" Red pleaded. "It was such a long time ago! We were all just kids."

"We haven't been kids for years," Goldilocks said. "You have had plenty of chances for redemption."

"I love him, too! I was just doing what I thought I had to!" Red said.

"You just couldn't stand that I had something you didn't!" Goldilocks yelled.

Goldilocks went in for the final push, but Red dodged it, and Goldilocks almost fell into the pit herself. Red ran away from her as fast as possible, running along the edge of the pit. The plants below moved with excitement; they knew one of them was bound to fall in.

"Come here!" Goldilocks yelled.

"Get away from me, you fugitive floozy!" Red said.

They did an entire lap around the pit, and Red ran into the castle ruins. Goldilocks took out her sword and began swinging it at her, barely missing her by inches.

"This is awful!" Alex said with her hands covering her cheeks.

"This is awesome!" Conner said. "Five bucks says Goldilocks wins!"

The twins wanted to help, but there was nothing they could do without getting into harm's way.

"We used to be such good friends!" Red said, constantly ducking Goldilocks's sword.

"You don't know what a friend is!" Goldilocks said, her swing coming much closer each time. "You could have cleared my name the day you became queen of that pathetic kingdom!"

"I never even wanted to be queen in the first place! I just wanted to impress him!" Red confessed. "Keeping you an outlaw kept you away from him! It wasn't anything personal!"

"Personal?" Goldilocks said, absolutely infuriated. "Forcing me to live a life of running and committing crimes to survive because you wanted to steal my boyfriend wasn't personal?" She swung her sword hard at Red and knocked a big chunk out of the ruins' stone wall.

Red ran up the decaying staircase; it was the only place left to go. Goldilocks ran up after her, and Red was cornered. The only way to escape was to jump into the pit.

"If you let me go I'll clear you name!" Red begged.

"Liar!" Goldilocks said.

"I'll give you my castle! Half of it is being rebuilt because of a fire! It looks wonderful!" Red said.

"I don't want your castle! I want revenge!" Goldilocks said, and pushed Red off the staircase.

Red screamed and fell down toward the pit. The vines reached toward her, happy to finally be fed. Suddenly, a rope came out of nowhere and lassoed Red around the waist just as she fell into the pit and was swallowed up by the vines and thornbush.

"What the—?" Goldilocks said.

The twins and Froggy turned to see a woman riding a black horse on the other side of the pit holding the other end of the rope.

"It's the Huntsman's daughter!" Conner yelled and pointed at her.

Red screamed as the vines pulled her down toward the bottom of the pit. The Huntsman's daughter tied the rope to the horse and took off. Red was yanked out of the pit and dragged behind her.

"Not again!" Red screamed. She was dragged off into the horizon, now a captive of the Huntress.

"Son of a witch!" Goldilocks said, watching a stranger ride off with her chance at revenge. She hopped down from the staircase, and Porridge joined her by the ruins.

"What just happened?" Conner asked, completely overwhelmed by all the excitement.

"I don't know," Alex said. "But after seeing the Huntsman's daughter, I have a bad feeling."

"Who was that woman?" Goldilocks asked.

"The Huntsman's daughter," Conner said. "She's working for the Evil Queen."

"The Evil Queen?" said Goldilocks, growing even angrier.

"We have to get as far away from this place as possible," Alex instructed.

"Oh no," Froggy said softly. He looked more frightened than the twins had ever seen him.

Out of the distance, the Big Bad Wolf Pack crept toward them. The wolves were all growling, more irritated and vicious than ever before. Steam was practically coming out of their nostrils. They surrounded the twins, Froggy, Goldilocks, and Porridge.

Goldilocks stood in front of the twins. Even she was scared. Normally she wouldn't have considered the wolves to be more than she could handle, but the way they stared at their group, hungry and irritated, she knew this wasn't going to be a sporting encounter in the forest.

"After what you've put us through, we ought to claw your hearts out!" Malumclaw growled through gritted teeth at the twins. "And look who's decided to join them! I guess we get Red Riding Hood *and* Goldilocks tonight!"

The rest of the wolves howled their excitement.

"Just to let you know, you *just* missed Red Riding Hood," Conner said.

"Nice try," Malumclaw said.

"What do you want with children and an overgrown frog?" Goldilocks asked.

"We're taking the children to the Evil Queen," Malumclaw said. "We have no interest in the frog…. *Dig in, boys!*"

Froggy's face turned a pale green. The wolves moved toward him, snapping their massive jaws in his direction. Froggy turned to the twins.

"I'm going to get help, children," Froggy whispered to the petrified twins. A wolf leaped toward him, but Froggy jumped twice as high into the air, and the wolf missed him. Froggy landed on the other side of the circle the wolves had formed around them and took off running. A few wolves chased after him as he disappeared into the distance.

"Froggy!" Alex yelled after him. All they could do was pray he would be all right.

"Porridge," Goldilocks said, "I want you to get out of here, you understand? This is one battle we won't be able to win."

The horse was hesitant to leave her at first, but then nodded. She took off in the same direction Froggy had leaped. A wolf tried to attack the horse as she left, but Porridge kicked the wolf with her hind legs, and the wolf landed in the Thornbush Pit. He whimpered the entire way to the bottom as the vines wrapped themselves around the wolf and dragged him down to the bottom forever.

The rest of the wolves weren't going to allow any more escapes.

"We're going to see the queen," Malumclaw growled. "And if anyone else tries to run off, it'll be the last thing you do."

The twins trembled. Goldilocks put her hands on the twins' shoulders, leaned close to them, and whispered into their ears. "Be brave, children," Goldilocks said. "Courage is one thing that no one can ever take away from you."

CHAPTER TWENTY

HEART OF STONE

The wolves led the twins and Goldilocks across the dead and deserted land. They walked for miles and miles across the rocky ground, never stopping for anything. The wolves kept a close eye on their captives; if the twins so much as breathed too deeply, they would get a threatening growl.

The wolves had confiscated Goldilocks's sword and Alex's bag, so they couldn't get to the Wishing Spell items. Alex closely watched her bag being carried in one of the wolves' mouth; everything she and her brother needed was in there. Their chance at going home was just a few feet away and yet out of reach.

The twins didn't know if they were more angry or scared. Just minutes before they had been positive they were on their way home, and now they didn't even know where they were, where they were going, or if they would even survive what was ahead. Being so afraid gave them an odd sense of courage. They were being taken as prisoners to one of the most infamous villains of all time; they didn't see how things could get much worse.

The area they were traveling through seemed foreign even to Goldilocks, who the twins were certain had seen *every* part of *every* kingdom. Her eyes darted around with as much curiosity as the twins' did. The land looked different from the rest of the Sleeping Kingdom. This land didn't seem to be sleeping like the rest of the kingdom did; this land seemed to have been murdered.

A decrepit castle finally came into view in the distance. It was made of stone but looked so frail that a strong wind could knock it over. Alex and Conner knew without having to be told that this was where the wolves were taking them, and somewhere inside the Evil Queen was waiting.

They reached the front of the castle, and Malumclaw howled. A rickety drawbridge was slowly lowered, and a towering man with a graying beard dressed in several layers of animal skins greeted the wolves.

"She's been expecting them," the Huntsman said.

The wolves guided the twins and Goldilocks over the drawbridge. As soon as the twins entered the castle they wanted to leave it. All the dust and cobwebs didn't make for a pleasant welcome.

The Huntsman pushed the twins down a stony corridor, through a set of large doors that creaked horribly, and into a long great hall. The great hall was empty except for a few chairs and a small table.

Red Riding Hood was tied to one of the chairs, with a large white scarf tied around her mouth. Her eyes were teary and puffy. She was excited to see the twins at first, happy not to be the only prisoner, but then began to panic under her restraints when she saw Goldilocks and the wolves behind them.

The Huntress stood next to Red, keeping a careful watch over the fidgeting queen.

In the middle of the room, facing two tall mirrors, one gold and one black, was a hooded woman. She was very still and very silent.

"Seat them," the woman said, still with her back toward them. Without any doubt, the twins knew she was the Evil Queen; they could just feel it. They had never been so tense in their lives.

The Huntsman and the Huntress forcefully sat Alex, Conner, and Goldilocks down in the chairs and tied ropes around their torsos, hands, and feet.

"Easy!" Goldilocks said, glaring at the Huntress, who tripled her knots. "Did anyone ever tell you it isn't nice to kidnap other people's hostages?"

Red let out a high-pitched cry and mumbled something along the lines of "This is so unfair." The twins now understood why she'd had a handkerchief in her mouth in the first place.

"We've brought you the twins plus a bonus, Your Majesty." Malumclaw lowered his head in a scornful and mocking bow. There was heavy tension between the two.

"Did anyone escape?" the Evil Queen asked.

"Just an overgrown frog and a horse," Malumclaw growled.

"Then we don't have much time," she said. "Put the items on the table."

The Huntsman seized Alex's bag from the wolf carrying it and placed it on the table next to the twins. The Evil Queen had her own collection of Wishing Spell items on display here: a lock of golden hair, a chunk of Red Riding Hood's basket, and the other glass slipper.

"A deal is a deal!" Malumclaw said. "We've brought you the twins. Now give us Red Riding Hood!"

Red Riding Hood whimpered and said something like "Why is this happening to me?" through the handkerchief.

"You will have her when I am finished with the children," the Evil Queen said. "Now wait outside."

"That was not part of our bargain!" Malumclaw bellowed, and his pack snarled behind him.

"I said wait outside!" the Evil Queen ordered. Her voice was so overpowering that the twins felt tears form in their eyes from the mere sound of it. "You can have Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks, *and* the children when I am satisfied."

The wolves were infuriated, but they left the hall and waited outside the castle.

"Empty the bag," the Evil Queen ordered.

The Huntsman did as he was told. He pulled out all the items the twins had collected, one by one, and placed them on the table surface: the lock of hair, the glass slipper, the chunk of basket, the stone crown, the vial containing the fairy tear, the spindle, the jewels, and the knife.

"We need those!" Conner said, squirming in the ropes. "Why do you need the Wishing Spell anyway? Don't you have powers or something?"

"The only powers I have are the powers of intimidation," the Evil Queen said. She turned away from her mirrors and looked at the twins.

She wasn't the vicious monster they had expected. She was still very much the woman from the portrait in Snow White's palace, but she had been weathered by time and fatigue. Her face was plain, but it was a plainness that had so much potential for beauty had time and circumstance allowed it. Her eyes were dark and bleak; she seemed empty and cold down to her soul.

The Evil Queen walked over to the table and observed all the Wishing Spell items. She picked up the vial that held the fairy tear and stared into it.

"As soon as this tear touches the table, the Wishing Spell will be mine," she said.

Seeing the Evil Queen near all the items they had worked so hard to get ignited a fury inside Conner. He wanted to go home and wasn't about to let her stop them. If they weren't going to get to use the Wishing Spell, then *neither was she.*

Conner struggled against the ropes with all his might. It was painful, but he managed to get one of his feet free. He kicked as hard and as high as he could and knocked the vial out of the Evil Queen's

hand.

The vial flew across the room. The Evil Queen's eyes watched it as it soared away from her.

"Catch it!" she demanded.

The Huntsman ran as fast as he could and threw himself on the ground with his hands extended to catch it, but the vial hit the dusty stone floor inches from his fingertips and shattered. The tear sank into the stone and vanished.

The Evil Queen stared at Conner. Her face didn't move or express much, but the slightest movements made Conner very well aware that she was enraged.

"Stupid boy," the Evil Queen said. She struck him hard across the face with the back of her hand. Conner's whole body shifted with the blow.

"Conner!" Alex said.

"I'm fine," Conner said, slowly lifting his head straight to look at the Evil Queen. The whole side of his face began to swell.

"How long will it take to retrieve new fairy tears?" the Evil Queen asked.

"Days, Your Highness," the Huntsman said, getting back to his feet. "The fairy we caught only screamed when we tried to collect tears from her; none were produced. If my daughter left now, she could be back before sunrise two days from now."

"We don't have that kind of time," the Evil Queen said softly to herself. She promptly turned around and faced her mirrors. "Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, how much longer 'til forces invade this hall?" she asked.

The reflection in the black mirror became very cloudy and condensation began to drip down the glass.

"Conner, look. It's the Magic Mirror!" Alex said.

The dark silhouette of a man appeared in the mirror. A low and hoarse voice filled the great hall.

"This castle offered my queen sanctuary for weeks, But an army now approaches, led by a frog that speaks.
They move quickly in this direction, ready to attack, And they've joined forces with a cream-colored horse and a man named Jack."

"Jack?" Goldilocks said.

"Jack!" Red tried to say.

"Soldiers are coming!" Alex whispered to her brother. "Froggy's alive! He got help!"

"Those are probably my soldiers coming," Red mumbled. "They're coming to rescue me and slaughter all of you—especially *you*," she said, giving Goldilocks a dirty look.

The Evil Queen's eyes drifted from her Magic Mirror to the Mirror of Truth and watched Alex through the reflection. She stared at her through the mirror absolutely mesmerized; it was the most expressive the twins had seen her since they'd arrived.

"What should we do, Your Majesty?" the Huntsman asked. The Evil Queen ignored him; her attention was fixated on Alex.

"Why is she looking at you like that?" Conner asked.

"I don't know," Alex said with a trembling jaw. Everyone knew the Evil Queen had never cared too much for young girls, and Alex was afraid she would be the next victim to be offered a poisoned apple.

"Your Highness, what are your orders?" the Huntsman pleaded. "If soldiers are coming, we must leave!"

"No," the Evil Queen said. "I'll be finished before they arrive. Now I wish to be alone with the children. Take the others to the dungeon."

The Huntsman was hesitant, but he and the Huntress partially untied Red and Goldilocks and shoved them toward the door.

"Watch it, gramps," Goldilocks said.

"Do we get our own cells?" Red mumbled. "You can't put me in a cell with *her*! You might as well give me to the wolves!"

The doors slammed behind them. The twins were left alone in the great hall with the Evil Queen.

"Alex," Conner whispered to his sister, "I don't want to sound cheesy, but no matter what happens, I just wanted to say that I love you. You're the best sister I could ever have, and these last several days have been the most extraordinary in my entire life."

"Don't do that, Conner," Alex said, holding back tears with all her strength. "You're saying good-bye! Don't say good-bye! We're going to be okay…. Soldiers are on their way. They'll save us…." She didn't know which one of them she was convincing. "They'll save us."

"Unfortunately, no one can save you now," the Evil Queen said.

"So, are you going to kill us, then?" Alex asked.

The Evil Queen was silent. She didn't move a single muscle.

"Why are you doing this to us?" Conner asked. "Why are you so *evil*?"

"Ah," the Evil Queen said. "The age-old question: What makes one become who they are? Let me ask you this, children: What makes you *not* evil?"

The twins didn't understand the question. They were sure she was playing a mental game with them, but they answered with pride and honesty.

"We were raised right," Alex said. "We had two wonderful parents who taught us how to be good people, and we believe good things happen to those who are good at heart."

"So, you were environmentally influenced into being good people? That's precious," the Evil Queen said. "You said you *had* two parents? What happened to them?"

It made the twins sick to hear her ask about something so dear to them.

"Our dad died," Conner said. "Not that it's any of your business!"

"Was he a *good* person? Was he *good* at heart?" the Evil Queen said.

"He was the *best*," Conner said.

"I see," she said. "Then he was wrong, wasn't he? Surely, a good person would never have had such a tragedy happen to him? He must have taught you a lie."

"What are you getting at, lady?" Conner asked.

"I had parents once, too. They taught me a similar lie," she said.

The twins glanced at each other after hearing this, and the queen saw the surprise in their eyes.

"Shocking, isn't it? To know that someone like me had parents, had a life, and had *loved* once…" the Evil Queen said, becoming lost in thought.

"So if you had decent parents, who screwed you up?" Conner asked. "Or were you just born

miserable?"

The Evil Queen's eyes fell to the floor. "Much like you two, I was environmentally influenced into being who I am today."

She turned her back to the twins and faced her mirrors again.

"I'm going to tell you a story, children, a story that has rarely been told," the Evil Queen said.

"I doubt there's a story we don't know," Alex said.

"You don't know this story," she said. "It's mine."

Alex and Conner looked to each other nervously. Did they want to hear this story?

"Once upon a time, there was an enchantress," the Evil Queen began. "She was unlike all the fairies and witches that had ever lived before her; she lived without consequence and lived on desire and desire alone. She gave herself anything and everything she wanted, never caring how or who she hurt by doing so.

"Many years before I was born, the Enchantress decided she wanted the *world*, and sought it one kingdom at a time. There weren't as many kingdoms to conquer back then, especially after she put Sleeping Beauty's kingdom under the sleeping curse.

"Very late one winter's night, two villagers heard banging on their door and found a young maiden shivering on their doorstep. She was with child and was exhausted from running; she had just escaped from someone or something, but the villagers couldn't ask questions, because she began delivering the child right then and there. The maiden died giving birth to the child that night. Despite the mystery surrounding the maiden, the villagers adopted this child. It was a baby girl, who they named Evly."

"Evly?" Alex asked, and her eyes grew wide. The Evil Queen ignored her and continued the story.

"Evly grew up to be a very beautiful young woman. She was a kind and good-spirited girl, and everyone in her village loved her, especially one young man her age, a boy named Mira.

"He was a poet and used to recite poems to her all day by the edge of a lake a little way away from their village. Evly tried to impress him with her own poems, although they were never very good. She would say to him every day, "Mira, Mira, by the lake, my heart is yours to take." They used to laugh together and hold each other in their arms until dusk every day. The two fell madly in love and were engaged.

"However, on the eve of Evly's wedding, the Enchantress came for her, claiming that she and her birth mother belonged to her.

"The Enchantress killed Evly's adopted parents and took her into the far northeast to this very castle. Evly became just one of many slaves who belonged to the Enchantress. She had very big plans for the newest addition: Evly was groomed to marry Prince White, the future king of the Northern Kingdom, and the Enchantress would control the kingdom through her. But Evly resisted, of course; her heart already belonged to one man.

"Mira looked for Evly for years and eventually found her. They wrote letters to each other and exchanged them through the bars of Evly's cell. The Enchantress ultimately discovered the letters. But the Enchantress was smart; she knew if she killed Mira, Evly would be inconsolable and worthless to her. So instead, she imprisoned Mira inside a magic mirror for eternity. Evly was heartbroken," the Evil Queen said.

"You're Evly!" Alex said.

"The man in your Magic Mirror, he was your *fiancé*?" Conner asked.

"Yes," the Evil Queen said. "I became Evly, the Evil Queen of the Northern Kingdom. It has a nice

ring to it, doesn't it? People tend to be creative when they're condemning others."

"So that's how you became queen," Alex said.

"Not exactly," the Evil Queen said, glaring at her. "From the moment Mira was trapped inside the mirror, I refused to continue with the Enchantress's plan. I still pretended to go along with it, gaining her trust and becoming a protégé of sorts. She kept a room full of potions here in the castle. I spent hours of every day in that room, immersing myself with the substances, learning everything about them.

"I concocted a poison so strong and deadly that all the trees and flowers for miles and miles were killed after three drops hit the ground outside my cell window. I was positive it would bring the Enchantress to her end, and it did. The poison weakened the Enchantress to the state of an ailing human. She ran from the castle and died somewhere in the forest nearby, unable to take care of herself without magic.

"I freed her slaves from her castle, including the man who later became my Huntsman. The one person I wasn't able to free, however, was Mira. He was trapped in the mirror, and there was no way to get him out.

"I traveled all over the kingdoms for years, seeking help from every witch and fairy, but no one knew how to free the man from the mirror; the curse was too strong. Seeing the man I loved every day through a layer of glass, unable to touch him, or kiss him, or hold him was unbearable. I was more than heartbroken. The pain was so deep I could barely breathe. I was sure my heart would eventually stop beating if I didn't do something for it.

"I found an old witch named Hagatha deep in the Dwarf Forests and begged her to help me. She, like everyone else before her, could do nothing about the mirror, but she treated my heartbreak. She cut my heart out of my chest and turned it into stone," the Evil Queen said.

"Gross," Conner muttered.

She walked over to a stool on the side of her mirrors. On top of the stool was a stone that resembled a human heart. Alex gasped when she realized what it was.

"Only when I touch the stone do I feel any heartbreak, pain, or emotion whatsoever," the Evil Queen said.

She picked up the stone and held it tightly in her hand. The Evil Queen's reflection changed in the Mirror of Truth as she held the stone; they saw Evly's reflection instead, the young and beautiful maiden the Evil Queen had once been.

The Evil Queen set the stone back on the stool and her reflection changed back into the cold and hooded woman she was today.

"Then you really are *heartless*," Alex said.

"Why did you become queen, then?" Conner asked.

"I figured being a queen and having a monarch's power would give me the authority I needed to find a way to free Mira," the Evil Queen said. "Prince White became king and had recently been married. Soon it was announced that his wife was expecting their first child. I decided to strike before the heir was born.

"I used a love potion on the king, and he became enamored with me. That was easy, but getting rid of his pregnant wife was the difficult part. I poisoned her knitting needles and waited until she pricked herself. One cold night, while making a blanket for her future child, her water broke and she pricked herself with one of the needles from the shock of it. She died, but her handmaidens were still

able to save the child, and Snow White was born.

"A few months later, I was married to the king, and he was dead a few months after that. I was able to continue my quest to free Mira. Unfortunately, being inside the mirror for so long began to affect Mira. His mind, his memory, and his appearance all started fading away. He began speaking in verse, like his poems when he was younger. He could see things happening in the world that were miles and miles away but couldn't remember his own name. He was no longer a man; he was a reflection. Had my heart not been turned to stone already, watching the man I loved with all my heart slowly forget who I was would have killed me for sure.

"I was getting older, and Mira barely recognized me anymore. I ordered every beautician in the kingdom to my palace and underwent every beauty regimen possible for years and years to preserve the little youth I had left. Word of my new activities got out, and the kingdom criticized me, saying I was vain and obsessed with beauty.

"As I got older, so did Snow White. She became more and more beautiful every day. She longed to find some motherly companionship in me, but I had none to give. She used to sneak into my chambers and watch me undergo preservation treatments for hours.

"One day, Snow White snuck into my chambers while I was away and discovered Mira in the mirror. She looked very similar to myself when I was her age, and Mira believed she was me. For months and months, Snow White was all he could talk about. 'My queen is fair to see, but Snow White is far fairer than thee,' he would say. He had a new face and name to give all the love he felt for me.

"I wanted her dead. I ordered my Huntsman to take her into the woods and kill her. She escaped, but I tried again and again to kill her myself. I was convinced Mira would come back to me once she was dead, but it was too late; Mira was gone. He faded into what he has become today.

"My entire life has been spent trying to recover something that was taken from me so many years ago. However, I'll never be martyred for that life. I'll be forever known as the vain queen who tried to kill the poor, innocent, and helpless Princess Snow White and nothing more," the Evil Queen said. "But who wouldn't have gone to the ends of the earth to be reunited with the person they loved more than life itself? Who wouldn't have ripped their own heart out to stop that kind of pain?"

Alex couldn't stop the tears rolling down her face. There were so many times after the loss of her dad when she'd wished all the pain would go away; she may have turned her own heart into stone if she'd had the option. She couldn't help but see herself in the Evil Queen, and it was unsettling.

"I've done many terrible things in my time, but many terrible things have been done to me over time as well," the Evil Queen said. "So, as far as I'm concerned, the world and I are even."

"But it wasn't you!" Alex said. "You weren't thinking clearly! If you had your heart, you wouldn't have done all those horrible things to all those people. You're still Evly!"

"Think about how differently people would feel about you if they knew this!" Conner said.

"The world will always choose convenience over reality," the Evil Queen said. "It's easier to hate, blame, and fear than it is to understand. No one wants the truth; they want entertainment."

The Evil Queen turned back to the twins and saw the tears running down Alex's face. She walked over to Alex and let one of the tears roll onto her finger. The Evil Queen stared down at the tear, just as she had done to the vial of fairy tears.

"A sentimental story always gets the same reaction out of girls like you," the Evil Queen said.

She flicked Alex's tear onto the table with the Wishing Spell items. Suddenly, all the items began

to glow, and a golden light began swirling above them. The Evil Queen had activated the Wishing Spell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE MIRROR

What?" Alex said. Her head was throbbing from being so confused. "This doesn't make any sense! It needed a *fairy's* tear!"

"We can't let this happen!" Conner screamed. "We have to stop her! She can't use the Wishing Spell!"

The twins struggled and fought against the ropes, but there was nothing they could do; it was too late. The light rose off the Wishing Spell items and began to circle around the Evil Queen.

"No!" Conner screamed.

"Please, don't!" Alex yelled.

The Evil Queen took a deep breath. "Wishing Spell, I wish to free the man in the mirror," she said.

The light shot toward the mirror like lightning. The whole mirror was consumed in the light for a few moments before it faded. The glass melted away like ice on a warm day. The mirror looked like a doorway into a very dark room.

The twins waited with anticipation. The Evil Queen walked over to the mirror, keeping a cautious distance from it, but nothing happened. She got closer to the mirror, so close that the twins wondered if she was going to climb into it.

"Mira?" the Evil Queen asked.

Suddenly, a man fell out of the mirror and onto the floor. His eyes were closed and he was breathing very heavily. He was pale and seemed paralyzed; it was as if he had just awoken from a coma.

The man was the plainest person the twins had ever seen. He had no distinctive characteristics whatsoever. He had spent so much time reflecting others that he had lost himself completely.

"Where am I?" the man said between deep breaths. He had enough energy to keep one eye open at a time, but not both.

The Evil Queen picked up her heart of stone, and the twins could see the change in her face as her body was reunited with its soul. She was a different person.… She *was* a person.

"Mira, it's me, it's Evly. You're free!" the Evil Queen said. Her voice was different while she held the stone. She spoke softly, with love and affection. Tears poured down her face.

The twins could see the reflection of the Evil Queen and the man in the Mirror of Truth. The reflections weren't those of the pale man and hooded woman who were actually in the room with them. They were of two young people: One was the beautiful girl the Evil Queen had once been, and the other a very handsome young man that Mira must have been before being imprisoned in the mirror.

Evly cradled Mira in her arms and slowly rocked him. "You're free, Mira.… You're free," she repeated softly. "I freed you just like I promised. I'm so sorry it took me as long as it did."

The man opened both his eyes and stared up at her. She had only freed the very little of him that was left. The rest had faded away a long time ago.

"Evly," he said, and a slight smile appeared on his face, recognizing the name. The smile lasted only a moment. His eyes fluttered shut, and he stopped breathing.

"Mira?" the Evil Queen asked. *"Mira!"*

Mira didn't move. He was as lifeless as he looked. His reflection disappeared entirely from the

golden mirror.

"No," the Evil Queen said. *"No!"* The tears were running down much faster now. *"Come back! Please, come back!"*

Alex and Conner became emotional at the sight of it. The Evil Queen held the body of the man from her mirror in a tight embrace. She sobbed into him, still holding on to the heart of stone. She had worked her entire life for this, but she was too late.

The wolves were starting to become impatient outside the castle. Many were pacing back and forth across the drawbridge, others were lying across the entrance corridor, and one was sharpening his teeth with Goldilocks's sword. They had been waiting long enough for the Evil Queen, and they growled and grunted with restlessness.

Suddenly, Malumclaw's ears perked up, and he looked to the horizon. The ground was vibrating, as something large was traveling their way.

"What is that?" he asked.

A cavalcade of soldiers stampeded toward the castle at full speed. The soldiers were dressed in silver-and-green armor and came from the Northern Kingdom. They were led by Froggy and Sir Grant sharing a horse. Jack was riding Porridge beside them.

All the wolves jumped up.

"All right, boys! We're done waiting for the queen," Malumclaw said. "We're going inside to get Red Riding Hood and then we're getting out of here!"

All the wolves obediently howled and they ran into the castle. One of them pulled a lever with his mouth, raising the drawbridge.

The soldiers assembled on the edge of the moat.

"The Evil Queen is in there!" Froggy said to Sir Grant. "The wolves are working for her! They took my friends!"

"Evil Queen!" Sir Grant called out with his booming voice. "This is Sir Grant of Her Majesty Queen Snow White's Royal Guard. You have thirty seconds to surrender, or we will open fire on the castle!"

The soldiers aligned a row of cannons. Jack hopped off Porridge and found Goldilocks's sword on the ground. *She was in there.*

"Prepare the cannons!" Sir Grant ordered, and his soldiers positioned the cannons facing the castle. *"Fire!"*

A cannon blasted the raised drawbridge into pieces. The entire castle rattled from the hit.

"Prepare to fire again!" Sir Grant ordered.

"Hold your fire!" Jack yelled. "There are innocent people in that castle! You mustn't fire until we can safely get them out of there. I have reason to believe Queen Red Riding Hood may be inside!"

Grant looked fearful; he couldn't have the death of an innocent queen on his hands.

"You have ten minutes before we open fire," Grant told Jack. "Get in there and save as many people as you can."

Jack nodded without hesitation. If the woman he loved was in harm's way, nothing would stop him from saving her.

"I'll go with you," Froggy said, secretly alarmed at his own bravery, which had suddenly swept

over him. “You may need a hand.”

He and Froggy hopped onto Porridge. The horse took a few steps back and then charged toward the castle, jumping over the moat and through the large opening where the drawbridge had been a moment before.

The castle’s dungeon was small, but it had a row of several small cells. Goldilocks’s and Red Riding Hood’s ropes and gags had been removed, but they were each put in their own cell (mostly so Goldilocks wouldn’t kill Red before the wolves had their chance). The Huntsman and the Huntress watched over them like father and daughter hawks.

“I just don’t understand why my army hasn’t rescued me yet! Shouldn’t that be their top priority?” Red whined. “If I were Cinderella, none of this crap would be happening!”

“I outran your army because, like most things about you and your kingdom, they’re *slow*,” Goldilocks said. “Besides, they’ve probably already elected a new queen by now.”

“That’s not funny!” Red said. “This has been the worst day of my entire life! I didn’t even know it was possible to be kidnapped twice in one day!”

The wolves stormed into the dungeon. Red went white with fear.

“Soldiers are invading the castle,” Malumclaw said. “We’re not waiting for the Evil Queen any longer! We’re taking Red Riding Hood *now*!”

“Get the queen,” the Huntsman said to his daughter. The Huntress nodded and ran down to the opposite side of the dungeon and up a small stone staircase. She looked back before climbing it, not sure if leaving her father alone was a good idea.

“No!” Red screamed. “You can’t let them take me!” She looked all over the dungeon, unsure who she was talking to. She didn’t have any friends in here. “I’m ready for this day to be over!”

“Fine, you can take her!” the Huntsman said to the wolves. He unlocked her cell, and Red jumped up and pushed the door open, knocking the Huntsman back into the wolves. She ran as fast as she could down the other side of the dungeon and up the stone staircase the Huntress had climbed.

“After her!” Malumclaw ordered, and he and his pack ran after the young queen. She managed to get a head start as the wolves had trouble fitting into the staircase.

Moments later, Jack and Froggy emerged into the dungeon. Jack was wielding Goldilocks’s sword.

“Stand back!” Jack yelled at the Huntsman, who backed into a corner with his hands up.

“Jack!” Goldilocks said, clutching the bars of her cell. “What are you doing here?”

“Porridge found me!” Jack said. “I knew something must be wrong, because you weren’t with her. She led me here, and I met up with Snow White’s army on the way.”

They stared at each other so lovingly that it made Froggy uncomfortable.

“Splendid. I’ll find Queen Red Riding Hood and the twins while you reunite,” he said, and hopped back in the direction they’d come from.

The Huntsman pulled a crossbow out from under his fur coat.

“Jack! Watch out!” Goldilocks screamed.

The Huntsman began shooting arrows at Jack. He ducked and dived, barely eluding them. Goldilocks had to dodge the arrows, too; they were ricocheting off the stone walls in every direction. The Huntsman moved like a machine, reloading his crossbow instantaneously each time he fired.

Goldilocks picked up an arrow that had landed near her and began picking the lock of her cell with the arrowhead.

Jack was trying to block the arrows with the sword. It was getting harder; the arrows were coming at him much faster. He hit one perfectly, and it flew behind the Huntsman. The Huntsman grunted and froze. His eyes bulged and he fell flat on his face. The arrow had bounced off the wall behind him and was now sticking out of his back. The Huntsman was dead.

"Jack! Behind you!" Goldilocks yelled.

Jack turned around and the Huntress stabbed him in the arm with her dagger. She had seen the whole thing.

"Ahhh!" Jack screamed.

He dropped the sword and fell to the ground. He crawled across the floor and sat himself up against the wall. He was clutching his arm. Blood was everywhere.

The Huntress walked toward him with her dagger raised. She didn't speak, but she had pure rage in her eyes; as far as she was concerned, Jack had just killed her father. She swooped toward him for a fatal strike.

Goldilocks blocked the dagger with her sword. She had picked the lock of her cell and repossessed her sword just in time to save Jack's life.

"I think it's time you and I had a little girl talk," Goldilocks said, and kicked the Huntress in the stomach. The Huntress rolled to the other side of the room and hopped back to her feet.

Goldilocks and the Huntress circled each other for a moment. They stared each other down, waiting for the other to make the first move. Goldilocks swung her sword at the Huntress and the duel began.

The Huntress only had a dagger half the size of Goldilocks's sword, but she used it well; Goldilocks had finally found her match. They moved all around the dungeon, each shielding offensive strikes from the other.

The Huntress cornered Goldilocks. Goldilocks ran up the wall and flipped over the Huntress, cornering *her* now.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Jack asked.

"I'll tell you later!" Goldilocks said.

The Huntress head-butted Goldilocks and ran out of the dungeon.

"Come back here!" Goldilocks called out, and chased after her.

They continued their fight throughout the castle, climbing higher and higher as they went….

Meanwhile, Red Riding Hood was being chased through the castle by the Big Bad Wolf Pack. She was running for her life, and tears were streaming down her face. She had only been this scared once before, an infamous day when she'd visited her grandmother as a child.

Red wasn't crying from fear alone, though; she was also upset that she was getting one of her favorite dresses ruined. Red also wished she had chosen shoes better equipped for running when she'd dressed herself earlier that day.

She reached one of the highest levels of the castle. Areas of the floor had rotted away and she had to be very careful not to fall through any of the large holes that would drop her several stories below. The wolves behind her were not being so cautious; they had a hard time getting traction on the smooth wooden floor and kept slipping into the holes, howling as they fell to their deaths.

Red ran up a wooden staircase. The upper half of the staircase crumbled away in front of her as she passed the landing.

"That's not good," Red said.

She looked back at the steps behind her and saw Malumclaw. She was trapped. The wolf made his way toward her one step at a time, enjoying the aggravation it caused her.

"I've waited for this moment for over a decade," Malumclaw growled.

"Oh my, what big claws you have," Red said, trembling.

"The better to maul you with, my dear," Malumclaw said.

Red had never expected to die like this. She had always imagined it would be back in her castle with dozens of her and Jack's children by her bedside.

"Oh my, what big teeth you have," Red said.

"The better to bite you with, my dear," Malumclaw said. He was just a few feet away. He arched his back, ready to pounce.

Suddenly, a quiet, whistling sound came from outside the castle. A cannonball crashed through the wall and directly into Malumclaw. The stairs collapsed, and the wolf was knocked into the next room. If he had survived it, he wouldn't be in one piece.

"Oh my…" Red said. She grasped on to the banister of the stair landing as if her life depended on it. The steps on either side of her were gone; she was truly stuck now.

The landing started to teeter. The wood below it was slowly starting to crumble.

"Oh my… oh my… oh my!" Red screamed. The banister collapsed, and Red fell. She screamed the entire way down.

Just a few seconds before Red was about to hit the floor, Froggy jumped into the air and caught the young queen. They both landed safely, courtesy of his strong frog legs.

"You saved my life!" Red said with big, thankful eyes.

"I don't believe we've been formally introduced, Your Majesty," Froggy said. "My name is—"

Froggy never got to finish. Red was repeatedly kissing his cheek. He turned dark green—who knew a frog could blush?

The castle began to shake as more cannons were fired.

"They've started the attack!" Froggy said. "We have to find Conner and Alex and get out of here!"

Alex and Conner didn't know what was going on. All they could hear was the clanking of swords and the whimpering of wolves from outside the great hall, and the muffled announcements of the soldiers outside of the castle. They felt the castle shaking and falling apart around them.

Cannonballs began bursting through the walls of the great hall. Big stone chunks of the ceiling began to fall around them. They knew they had to get out of the castle as fast as possible.

"Your Majesty?" Alex asked the Evil Queen. "We have to get out of here! The castle is falling apart!"

The Evil Queen didn't respond. All she could do was cry over the body of her former lover.

"If we don't get out of here soon, we're going to make Humpty Dumpty's accident look like a scrape on the knee!" Conner said.

The Evil Queen wasn't listening to them. She was so grief-stricken that she couldn't hear. She didn't even seem aware of what was happening to the castle.

"*Evly!* Please! You need to untie us!" Alex pleaded. "Just drop the stone and you won't feel all this sadness!"

The doors into the great hall creaked open, and Froggy ran into the hall. Red watched from the

doorway, panicked by all the destruction.

"Froggy!" Conner yelled. "Untie us before we're crushed!"

"I'm coming, children!" Froggy said. He hopped across the room and quickly began untying them as fast as he could. It was difficult, though—the knots were tight. He untied Conner first, and then the two worked together to free Alex.

"Please hurry!" Red called out from the doorway. "My castle's being remodeled, and I'd really like to see it before I die!"

Alex was finally freed. Conner and Froggy ran toward the door, but Alex went to the table and started putting all the Wishing Spell items back into her bag.

"What are you doing?" Conner yelled. "What part of *imploding castle* don't you understand?"

"I'm not leaving without these!" Alex said. "We made promises to return and to destroy them, remember?"

The Wishing Spell was starting to wear off on the Magic Mirror; the glass was starting to *grow back*. A cannonball hit the wall closest to the mirrors. The golden mirror was knocked over by the blast and shattered across the ground. The Magic Mirror started rocking, about to fall at any moment.

"Evly!" Alex yelled. "Please, come with us!" But she was ignored.

The Magic Mirror fell on top of the Evil Queen and Mira and scattered into thousands of pieces on the ground. But the Evil Queen and Mira were nowhere to be found. The mirror had swallowed them just before it shattered.

Alex ran over and started searching for any trace of the Evil Queen or Mira, but there was nothing to find except bits of broken glass. The only thing Alex managed to find was the Evil Queen's heart of stone.

Alex put the heart of stone in her bag. She turned to run toward the door with her brother and Froggy, but something else caught her eye on the floor: It was her reflection in a piece of the golden mirror. It was so bright and colorful, and she saw herself smiling in it—and there was something behind her, something moving like *wings*.

"Come on, Alex!" Conner yelled. "I don't want to be an only child!"

"Coming!" Alex said. She ignored the glass and joined her brother, Froggy, and Red in the doorway of the crumbling great hall.

They found Jack in the corridor outside the great hall, still holding on to his wounded arm. Porridge was impatiently waiting here, too, not wanting to leave without her mistress.

"Jack!" Red said, and went to embrace him. "You came!"

"I didn't come for you!" Jack said, and refused to let her touch him. "Where's Goldilocks?"

Red put a hand on her chest and was short of breath. Pure heartbreak started to consume her like a delayed poison. He really was in love with Goldilocks.

"Let me get everyone to safety, and then I'll go back for her!" Froggy said.

"I'll go with you—*ahhh*!" Jack had begun to speak but screamed when he tried to move his arm.

"No, you won't," Froggy said.

One by one, Froggy took hold of Alex, Conner, Red, and Jack and leaped with them across the moat. Porridge took some convincing, but Jack coaxed her into hopping over the moat with them. They joined the soldiers, many of whom bowed upon seeing Queen Red Riding Hood.

"Forgive my hair, gentlemen," Red said. "It's been a rough day."

"Where is the Evil Queen?" Sir Grant asked.

"She's gone," Alex said softly.

"Gone?" he asked.

"Yes," Alex said sadly. "Trust me, you won't have to worry about seeing her again."

Sir Grant nodded. A huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders and the shoulders of his kingdom.

"Where was Goldilocks when you last saw her?" Froggy asked Jack.

"She was fighting that woman. I don't know where they went," Jack said.

"There she is!" Conner said, pointing upward.

Everyone raised their heads to look. Near the very top of the castle, Goldilocks and the Huntress were still dueling… *on the roof*.

No one could do or say anything. They all just watched the fight with their mouths and eyes wide open. Neither of the women seemed to have an advantage over the other. It was going to be a fight to the finish. The castle was disintegrating around them, but they kept fighting, each determined to kill the other.

Their fight had turned into a battle. They swung their weapons toward each other more violently than ever.

Part of the roof near where they stood caved in, and Goldilocks lost her balance. She dropped her sword while trying to regain her footing. The Huntress saw this as an opportunity to strike; she raised her dagger high above her head. It was aimed for Goldilocks, and there was nothing she could do to defend herself.

"No!" Jack yelled. He ran over to a cannon and lit it. He wrenched it toward the Huntress's direction, and it fired. A cannonball soared toward the women and blasted away the section of roof the Huntress was standing on. She fell the entire height of the castle and into the moat, silently screaming the entire way. There was no way she could have survived the fall.

Goldilocks found her balance and lovingly looked down at Jack. They shared a moment of blissful eye contact before disaster struck again. Dust rose as the castle began to collapse completely underneath Goldilocks.

"Goldilocks!" Jack yelled.

"I can't watch!" Alex said, and buried her face in Conner's shoulder.

It was hard to see anything through the dust. The sound was thunderous; thousands upon thousands of stones were falling on top of one another. Many rolled over into the moat. The dust eventually cleared out once the stones had settled. The castle was now just a massive pile of stone bricks. Goldilocks was nowhere to be found.

"Goldilocks?" Jack hollered, running along the edge of the moat, trying to find any trace of her.

The odds didn't seem in her favor. Froggy jumped across the moat and disappeared into the debris. Everything was silent. The twins thought Jack was going to have a heart attack while waiting. Every second that they didn't hear or see anything felt like an hour.

Slowly but surely, two figures made their way through the wreckage: It was Froggy, and he was helping Goldilocks through the rubble. She was limping, but she was alive.

The twins cheered, and Jack fell to his knees. They had never seen anyone so thankful in their lives. Froggy leaped over the moat with Goldilocks, and she and Jack collided into each other's arms. They shared a kiss so passionate that a few of the soldiers blushed. It was love personified.

Red Riding Hood could feel her entire body ache with heartbreak while watching the scene. This

may have been the only time she hadn't gotten what she'd wanted, and Jack had always been what she'd wanted more than anything.

Porridge happily pranced over to Goldilocks, who petted her horse's mane.

"I'm all right, girl," Goldilocks said. "I'm just banged up a little."

"Goldilocks," Sir Grant called out officially. "You're under arrest."

"Wait a second! Hold on!" Jack said, standing in the way of the approaching guards. He turned and gave Red a scornful look. "Do something!"

At first, Red didn't know what to say. She had never really done anything official and queen-like.

"The Red Riding Hood Kingdom would like to pardon Goldilocks for all the crimes she's committed," Red said. "And it's a very long list."

"That may be," Sir Grant said. "But you can't pardon all the crimes she committed in other kingdoms. She's going to spend the rest of her life in prison. *Seize her!*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SNOW WHITE'S SECRET

The entire party traveled back to the Northern Kingdom in silence. The pattering of the horses' hooves on the road was the only sound the group made. The whole world seemed to have sighed with relief now that the Evil Queen was gone.

Goldilocks was given permission to ride Porridge back into the kingdom, but her hands and feet were wrapped in chains. An annoyed expression was frozen on her face. Jack faithfully walked by her side the entire trip with his hand on top of the manacles around hers.

Red Riding Hood watched them from afar, looking away only when someone noticed her staring at the couple. She had never experienced so many emotions at once. She remained silent and still, praying that the hurt would go away.

The twins were especially quiet during the journey. After everything that they'd witnessed, it was hard to find words to express what they were thinking and feeling. Their thoughts were filled with the Evil Queen's story. They were haunted by images of her holding the body of the man whom she had loved her entire life, before being consumed by the mirror. And while they were saddened by her tale, they were even more disappointed that the Wishing Spell was gone.

They feared how long it would take for them to discover another way home. What obstacles and dangers would they have to endure when and if they found an alternative? What would they do in the meantime? Where would they live?

"I'm so sorry, children," Froggy said as they went. "I feel completely responsible. Had I just let you use the Wishing Spell instead of persuading you to come with me, none of this would have happened."

"It isn't your fault, Froggy," Alex said. "The wolves would have gotten to us sooner or later."

"Actually, this whole thing *is* your fault," Conner said. "If you hadn't told us about the Wishing Spell none of this would have happened in the first place. We would have never been chased by wolves, kidnapped by trolls, or targeted by the Evil Queen."

Froggy lowered his head. The guilt was heavy and it weighed him down. Alex looked like she was about to punch Conner in the face.

"But," Conner said with a big cheesy smile, "you did save our lives like three times, so I think that makes up for it."

Froggy chuckled. "You are more than welcome to live with me," he said. "I'll help you find another way home. I promise."

The twins nodded and smiled at him. It was comforting to know they had a place to live, even if it was just a hole in the ground.

They traveled for a day and a half before they finally reached Swan Lake and arrived at Snow White's palace. Red Riding Hood seemed intimidated by a palace so regal and large.

"My castle is going to look just like this when it's finished," she told everyone around her, but no one seemed interested.

The soldiers immediately took hold of Goldilocks and escorted her to the dungeon.

"Wait a minute! You can't just throw her into captivity without a trial!" Jack said.

"For her sake, I hope she never gets a trial!" a soldier said.

“Go home, Jack,” Goldilocks said. “With good behavior, they should let me out in a few decades.”

Jack followed them anyway, protesting the entire time, but even he knew there was nothing he could do.

“Come with me,” Sir Grant said to the twins. “We’ll find the queen.”

The twins, Red, and Froggy followed the soldier into the palace. They went up the staircase to the third floor and down the hall to the door of what must have been the real entrance into the storage chamber.

Grant knocked on the door. “Your Majesty, it’s Sir Grant. Are you in there?” he said.

“Yes, please come in,” Snow White said from inside.

They all followed Sir Grant inside. The room looked completely different. All the furniture had been uncovered, and the paintings had been placed on the walls. It looked like an actual room again.

“What are you two doing here?” Snow White asked. She was putting the portrait of the Huntsman back on the wall. For the past couple of days, she had been restoring the room by herself.

“Your Majesty,” Sir Grant said, lowering his helmet. “We found your stepmother hiding in a castle in the northeast Sleeping Kingdom.”

“And?” Snow White asked, bracing herself for the news.

“She’s dead,” Grant informed her.

Snow White’s face became paler, which the twins hadn’t thought was possible. She sat down on the platform in the back of the room. She didn’t cry, but anyone could tell it was difficult news to process.

“How did it happen?” Snow White asked.

Grant looked down at the twins. “I wasn’t there, but they saw it happen,” he said.

“She didn’t *die,* per se,” Alex said, trying to put it delicately. “The castle was falling apart, and her mirror, well, it—”

“It fell on top of her and swallowed her like a bug! *Boom!* And then she disappeared!” Conner said excitedly. “It was crazy! There was nothing left!”

Alex gave her brother a dirty look. “Well, not necessarily,” she said.

Alex reached into her bag and pulled out the heart of stone. Snow White gasped upon seeing it. Alex walked across the room and handed Snow White her stepmother’s heart.

“This was left behind,” Alex said. “I think you should have it.”

Snow White looked down at the stone and tears spilled out of her eyes.

“Sir Grant, I’d like to be alone with the children,” Snow White said. “Please arrange rooms for the others if they would like to stay,” she said, nodding to Red and Froggy.

“Why, thank you, Your Majesty,” Froggy said, and bowed.

“That’s very nice, thank you,” Red said. “Maybe just until my palace is done being rebuilt. I’m putting in a room just like this one—”

Sir Grant ushered them out of the chamber before Red could finish. The twins were left alone with Snow White. She was very quiet for the first few moments. All she could do was stare down at the stone.

“I guess you didn’t listen to my advice, then,” Snow White said.

“We listened,” Conner said. “We just ignored it.”

“Do you know what this is?” Snow White asked them, holding up the heart of stone.

"Yes," Alex told her. "It's her heart. She told us all about it and about her life before she was, well, the Evil Queen."

"It was one heck of a story, too," Conner said. "Did you know that guy in her Magic Mirror was actually her long-lost boyfriend?"

"Yes, I did," Snow White said. "That's why I helped her escape."

Both of the twins gasped and shook their heads in disbelief. They couldn't have heard her correctly.

"What?" Alex asked. "*You* helped her escape?"

"No way!" Conner said.

"Yes," Snow White said. She showed no remorse with her confession. "I sat in her cell for hours and listened to her story. It broke my heart. So, in a final attempt to please her, I arranged for her and her mirror to be taken up the river and into the next kingdom so she could continue her work."

The twins couldn't believe it. They wanted to ask so many questions, but only grunts and light stutters came out of their mouths.

"All these years, I wondered why she didn't love me, and then I finally understood it—it was because she couldn't," Snow White said. "I thought a heart as broken as hers was punishment enough for her crimes against me. Did she free him, then?"

"She did," Alex said. "But unfortunately it was too late. He died in her arms."

Snow White let out a distressed sigh. "I see," she said.

"But they were together," Conner said, "one last time."

"So what happens now?" Alex asked. "Do we clear her name? Do we tell the world the truth about her?"

"I'm afraid that's easier said than done," Snow White said. "I think the best thing we can do now to honor her memory is to live every day with the compassion and understanding no one ever gave her."

The twins looked to each other and exchanged sad smiles.

"I think what I've learned from all of this is that *villains* are mostly just people villainized by circumstance," Alex said.

Snow White nodded, sincerely looking down at the heart. "I agree," Snow White said. "That's the tragic lesson we can learn from the Evil Queen."

The dungeon was a miserable place, as Goldilocks was learning firsthand. Her cell was small and damp. The smell was horrible and the light was scarce. Occasionally a rat would try to run into her cell, and Goldilocks would look down at it meanly and intimidate it into running the other way.

"Don't even think about it," she said multiple times to the rodents.

It was just past midnight and all was quiet in the dungeon. Goldilocks couldn't sleep in her first night of captivity. She knew this day had been bound to come, but as she sat on the hard floor, she couldn't help but feel cheated that it had come so soon.

Suddenly, a pair of footsteps echoed through the dungeon as someone from the palace above made their way down the spiral staircase and past the rows of cells. A young woman in a long hooded cloak slowly made her way to Goldilocks's cell.

"Gross! Eww! Yuck!" the woman said after each step.

Goldilocks recognized the prissy voice.

"Hello," Red Riding Hood whispered awkwardly.

"What are you doing down here?" Goldilocks asked. "Have you come to personally escort me to my execution?"

"Please keep your voice down," Red said. "The guards don't know I'm in here."

"What do you want?" Goldilocks asked her.

"I've come to let you out," Red said.

"What?" Goldilocks said, completely shocked. "Why?"

"Because I've decided to make things right," Red said very haughtily.

"Go ahead, then, let me out," Goldilocks said, almost daring her. She didn't get her hopes up. She knew there had to be a catch.

"I will, but first, I wrote you a letter," Red said, and pulled out a piece of parchment from inside of her cloak.

"You want me to read your letter first?" Goldilocks said, not even attempting to disguise the annoyance in her voice.

"Of course not. I know you probably can't read," Red said sincerely.

Goldilocks raised her eyebrows. "You're so lucky these bars are between us right now—"

"That was just a joke; lighten up, Goldie. I've been working on this all night and thought it was best if I came down here and read it to you myself," Red said.

"I'm listening," Goldilocks said, and crossed her arms.

Red cleared her throat.

" 'Dear Goldilocks,' " Red began reading. " 'I'm sorry I ruined your life.' Wow, I feel better already after saying that part! 'Looking back on it, I know sending you that letter when we were kids wasn't the right thing to do. I never meant to force you into being a fugitive. I thought the bears would scratch you up or eat one of your arms at most.' "

"Is this letter supposed to make me want to kill you *less*?" Goldilocks asked.

"Let me finish first," Red said. " 'I've loved Jack for just as long as you have, but he has chosen to love a less attractive, less intelligent, and less wealthy girl instead. He loves you, not me, and this is the hardest thing I will ever have to realize. I hope that by freeing you from the dungeon tonight you can forgive me. Love, Your friend, Her Majesty the Great Queen Red Riding Hood.' "

Goldilocks had never been so annoyed in her entire life. "It took you all night to write *that*?" she asked.

"Yes, and I meant every word," Red said. "What do you say? Am I forgiven? Are we even?"

"Open the door first," Goldilocks said. She would have rather spent the rest of her life in the cell than spend another five minutes with Red Riding Hood.

Red fussed with a pair of golden keys and eventually found the right one to unlock the cell door. Goldilocks stepped out of her cell, looked Red directly in the eye, and slapped her hard across the face.

"Ouch!" Red yelled.

"There. *Now* we're even," Goldilocks said.

"I know I deserved that," Red said, holding her hand against the side of her face. "Now put this on before we get caught and both end up behind these bars."

Red threw her cloak over Goldilocks, and the two women hurried out of the dungeon.

They crept through the halls of the palace and made their way past the front lawns. They walked through a forest for a little ways and came to Ugly Duckling Pond. Porridge was waiting for Goldilocks by the edge of the pond. At first, Goldilocks could not see, but behind the horse, impatiently waiting, was Jack.

Goldilocks stopped dead in her tracks. "What are you doing here?" she asked him, although she already knew the answer.

"I did it, Jack! I told you I could!" Red said with a big smile.

"I'm coming with you," Jack said.

"Jack, we've been through this. You can't come with me. Especially now—I'll be wanted more than ever before once they discover I'm missing," Goldilocks said.

"Every day without you is ruined," Jack said. "I won't spend any more of my life wondering if the woman I love is dead or alive or rotting in some prison. I thought I lost you back at the castle, and I refuse to ever feel that way again. I'm coming with you, even if it means that I have to chase you on foot."

Tears filled the eyes of both women for different reasons. Both of their hearts belonged to the same man. Red would have given everything she owned to have heard him say that to her.

"Are you really willing to spend every minute of every day running from the law for the rest of your life just to be with me?" Goldilocks asked.

"I would give up anything to spend every minute of every day with you," Jack said. He hopped onto Porridge's back and reached his hand down to help her up.

Goldilocks's head was filled with reasons and excuses not to let him do this. She wanted to convince him to stay and live his life, but this time her heart wouldn't let her. She took Jack's hand and jumped onto Porridge with him.

Together they took the reins and charged into the night. By sunrise they would be the most wanted fugitives in the world, but, at last, they were in each other's arms.

"You're welcome! No need to thank me! I'll be fine!" Red called out after them as they disappeared into the forest. *"I'll be fine."*

Red fell to her knees and sobbed. Tears poured down her face, and her makeup ran with them. She had never cried this hard in her entire life.

"That was a very noble thing you did," said a voice behind her.

She turned and saw Froggy leaning down by the pond, collecting flies into a large glass jar.

"How much longer until this feeling goes away?" Red asked.

"I'm afraid traces of that feeling may be with you the rest of your life," Froggy said. "But it'll get better over time."

"I thought helping her escape would help the pain, but it only made it worse," Red said.

Froggy leaned down beside her. "It doesn't matter how greatly you've been hurt or how much you're hurting, it's what you do with the pain that counts," he said. "You could cry for years, and rightfully so, or you could choose to learn and grow from it. Take it from me: I spent years hiding in a hole, afraid to come out because of what people would think of me. But one day I decided to leave, and I ended up saving lives!"

Red dried her tears on his coat. He hadn't offered it, but he didn't mind.

"You're very smart for a frog," Red said with a big smile. "Perhaps now, with all of my dreams crushed, I can devote all that empty head space and energy to my kingdom. I am queen, after all."

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Froggy said. He offered his arm to her and helped the saddened queen to her feet. They escorted each other back to the palace.

“What is your name, by the way?” Red asked him. “I never learned it.”

He hesitated. “Froggy,” he said. “Just call me Froggy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A ROYAL INVITATION

Alex and Conner were both given their own chambers in the palace. It had been the first time since their stay at the Shoe Inn that they had slept in a bed, and it was the first night since they had arrived in the Land of Stories that they had gotten a full night's rest. They were so exhausted that they slept until mid-afternoon the next day.

It was strange for them to sleep apart from each other. Alex and Conner both woke up every hour or so, each looking for the other, and had to remind themselves where they were and that they were finally safe.

The palace servants had taken their T-shirts and jeans to wash, and the twins were given clothes to wear in the meantime. Alex was given a beautiful scarlet dress with fur around the cuffs and neck. Conner, against his will, wore a buttoned-up shirt with a collar far too ruffled for his taste and a pair of bloomers. For the first time in two weeks, they were dressed like they belonged there.

The entire palace had been buzzing with the news of Goldilocks's escape and Jack's disappearance. The twins couldn't help but smile behind the backs of the frantic soldiers they passed in the halls; they knew that, wherever Jack and Goldilocks were, they were together.

The twins offered to go meet the Fairy Godmother with Froggy, but he wouldn't allow it just yet.

"After the journey you've had, I insist you stay a day or two and catch your breath!" Froggy said.

And so they stayed for the next couple of days. They ate every meal with Queen Snow White and King Chandler in the massive dining hall. Snow White told the twins amazing stories as they ate, about growing up in the palace, living with the dwarfs, and the different reactions she'd encountered when people had thought she had come back from the dead.

Snow White invited the seven dwarfs over for dinner one night. The twins had wondered why one half of the table in the dining hall was significantly lower than the other, until the dwarfs marched in and took their places around it. Alex and Conner laughed and laughed until their stomachs hurt at the stories they told. Conner beat all seven of the dwarfs and Froggy in a game of cards and took all their gold coins.

It was the most fun the twins had had since they'd arrived in the fairy-tale world, but things became awkward once Conner asked King Chandler, "Why were you so interested in a dead girl, anyway?"

The twins spent their days in the enormous palace library. Alex scanned through every book on every shelf, looking for anything that could put them on a path to finding a new way home. It took her three days to go through all the books, but she found nothing. Conner watched her from a sofa every day while enjoying dessert after dessert from the kitchen.

"I think it's time we left this place," Alex told Conner.

"You want to leave?" Conner asked. "Why? This place is great!"

"I don't want to overstay our welcome," Alex said. "We're not going to find a way home sitting around a palace. Froggy said he would help us look; the sooner we start, the sooner we'll be home. Besides, despite what she may do to us, we promised Froggy we would let him take us to the Fairy Godmother. Maybe if she isn't too mad at us for breaking the glass slipper, she could give us a tip on how to get home."

"I guess," Conner said, sorrowfully looking down at the cake he was enjoying. His eyes suddenly lit up. "You know, there's something we haven't tried."

"What's that?" Alex asked.

He stood up, closed his eyes, and began knocking his heels together.

"There's no place like home. There's no place like home," Conner shouted. He opened one eye and was disappointed to see that he was still in the same place. "Just thought I would try it."

The next day, the twins packed up all their things and dressed in their own clothes. They tossed the saber from the deepest sea into the fireplace of Alex's room, destroying it, just as they promised the Sea Foam Spirit. They had just arranged to leave with Froggy after noon that day, when Sir Grant found them with some news.

"We've received a message for you," Sir Grant said.

Curious, the twins quickly followed him to the dining hall, where Snow White, Red Riding Hood, and Froggy stood around excitedly. The queens were each holding bright envelopes. A messenger from another kingdom blew his horn upon seeing the twins and presented them with an identical envelope.

"Cinderella had her baby!" Snow White told the twins. "It's a girl!"

The twins eagerly opened the envelope. It was white and addressed to "Alex and Conner Wishington." A golden wax seal on the back was in the shape of a glass slipper. The invitation said:

HIS HIGHNESS KING CHANCE CHARMING AND HER ROYAL MAJESTY QUEEN CINDERELLA CORDIALLY INVITE YOU TO AN EXCLUSIVE CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTH OF THEIR CHILD, THE UNNAMED PRINCESS, AT THEIR PALACE TOMORROW AFTERNOON.

"How wonderful!" Alex said. "But why are *we* invited?"

"Beats me," Conner said. "Maybe she needs babysitters."

"I wasn't expecting to be invited, either!" Red said. "Elected queens are usually left out."

"So *you're* usually left out?" Conner asked.

Red turned the same shade as her coat and didn't answer.

"Are we going to go?" Conner asked.

"Do you honestly think I'm going to miss this?" Alex asked. "Besides, we should return the glass slipper and the pieces of the other one to Cinderella. It's the right thing to do."

"What about Froggy?" Conner asked.

Froggy made a gesture like he was calming a fire. "Oh, don't worry about me," Froggy said. "I wasn't personally invited, so I don't want to intrude. I've never cared too much for the Charming Kingdom anyway."

"Nonsense!" Red said. "You'll come as my guest, and I won't hear any more of it."

She held her head high. Froggy knew he wasn't getting out of this one.

"We'll go see the baby princess, and then we'll find the Fairy Godmother with Froggy afterward," Alex decided. "Hopefully she'll still turn you back into a human."

"You mean, you're going to become human?" Red asked with a hand over her chest.

"Yes," Froggy said. "Long story."

"Why didn't you just say so!" Red said. "You have no idea how this changes how I feel about you!

Although, I must say I am very proud of myself for being friendly to a… um, well, whatever it is that you are now."

If Froggy had eyebrows, they would both have been raised.

"Come with me right now!" Red said, and linked his arm in hers. "Let's go plan our outfits for tomorrow!"

She led Froggy out of the room. He looked back at the twins, his eyes saying, *Help!* But they were too busy holding in laughs to rescue him.

By that afternoon, the carriages were loaded and the journey into the Charming Kingdom began. Snow White and King Chandler rode in one carriage, and the twins rode in the other with Froggy and Red. They were surrounded by a fleet of soldiers the entire way.

"Now *this* is the way to travel!" Conner said.

The twins kept pointing out familiar land that they had traveled across during their journey. It inspired them to tell Froggy and Red all about the adventures they had had. The frog man and the queen were all ears. Froggy croaked a couple of times during the twins' animated retellings, especially during the part about the trolls and goblins.

Given their audience, they left out the part about sneaking into Red's castle and being partially responsible for the fire. The twins kept stopping each other to say, "We can never tell Mom about that part," when they got to the more dangerous moments of their trip.

The carriages traveled through the night and arrived at Cinderella's palace the following afternoon. Rose petals filled the air and bells rang from afar as the entire kingdom celebrated the birth of their future ruler.

Froggy started acting very strange as soon as they arrived. He was shaky with nerves; the palace made him anxious for some reason. The group climbed the never-ending steps to the front entrance and was escorted down the red-carpeted hall and into the ballroom.

The ballroom was virtually empty and seemed much bigger when not filled with people dancing. Cinderella was sitting on her throne, cradling her newborn daughter. Sitting around her in a big circle, some in chairs and some on the floor, were Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, and members of the Fairy Council. Sleeping Beauty's and Rapunzel's husbands congratulated King Chance in the corner of the room.

"What are you going to name her?" Rapunzel asked. She was beautiful, with hair that matched the lock Alex and Conner had collected for the Wishing Spell. She wore it up in the biggest bun the twins had ever seen, and it still ran down her back and trailed behind her.

"I can't decide," Cinderella said.

"You should name her after her aunt Rapunzel," Rapunzel suggested, and everyone laughed.

"I love you, Rapunzel, but I love my daughter too much to ever do that to her," Cinderella said, and everyone laughed even harder.

"Look who's here!" Cinderella said as soon as she looked up to see the group walking toward them.

Everyone was happy to see Snow White and Chandler, but the room grew very tense when they saw Alex and Conner walking in behind them with a giant frog man. Everyone looked at them uncomfortably, as if they were naked.

"Aren't those the twins who stole the glass slipper?" King Chance said, stepping forward from the clump of kings.

"No! We tried telling you, it wasn't us!" said Alex, panicked, afraid history was about to repeat itself and she and her brother would be chased by guards.

"Everyone relax!" Cinderella laughed. "No one stole anything! I invited them here. My Fairy Godmother wanted to have a word with them."

"What does she want with them, dear?" King Chance asked his wife.

"I'm not sure," Cinderella said.

Alex and Conner exchanged looks of dread. This must be even more serious than the broken slipper.

"We may have accidentally broken one of your shoes," Alex said. Conner had never seen her look so ashamed.

"It wasn't really our fault," Conner said. "I mean, it *was*, but it was a really complicated situation and would never have happened unless it absolutely had to—"

"Oh, that's no trouble at all," Cinderella said. "I can't tell you how many times I've broken them myself. The Fairy Godmother always fixes them when she visits. That's probably all she wants. She'll be here soon."

The twins sighed with such relief that they shrank a few inches. Conner patted his sister on the shoulder, as he knew she had been stressing about it. If there was ever a group of people she wanted to leave a good impression with, it was this one.

Snow White, Red, Alex, and Conner joined the women huddled around the baby. King Chandler dragged Froggy over to where the men were in the corner and introduced them to him. Froggy awkwardly shook their hands; he was the first frog man ever to be inside the palace.

"Look at her!" Snow White said, looking down at the baby princess. "She's beautiful."

"She looks just like you, Cinderella!" Red said. "I was a beautiful baby myself."

The princess was indeed beautiful. She was only a few days old but looked just like her mother, with auburn hair and bright eyes.

"I'm so glad to see you two are all right!" Sleeping Beauty said to the twins. "Did everything work out for you?" She winked at them.

The twins looked down at their feet. "Not so great, unfortunately," Alex said. She reached into her bag and pulled out the spindle. "Thank you for letting us borrow this, though."

"My pleasure," Sleeping Beauty said, and took the spindle from her. "And Conner, I have to thank you for your—what did you call it again? Oh yes, the *rubber band trick.* We've been trying it on a few citizens, and it appears to be helping quite a bit!"

Conner was beaming. "I told you so!" he said, a rare thing for him to say.

"Snow White, I heard they finally found your stepmother," Cinderella said. "Congratulations! That must be such a relief."

The other queens and fairies added their congratulations on the subject. However, Snow White didn't seem happy about it.

"Is everything all right, Snow?" Sleeping Beauty asked.

"Yes, of course," Snow White said. "It's all very bittersweet."

"Bittersweet?" Emerelda asked.

"It's a long story," Snow White said.

"Wonderful! I love stories," Rapunzel said, and made herself more comfortable sitting on the floor.

Snow White looked at the twins. They smiled very supportively at her, encouraging her to tell the others everything they already knew.

Snow White told the queens and fairies all about her stepmother's past. She explained to them about the Enchantress taking her away from her family, how her fiancé was cursed into the mirror, and about the heart of stone. She left out the part about helping her escape, however, because just as the twins had kept details from Red Riding Hood, Snow White knew her audience.

Many of the women looked as if they were on the verge of tears. Some held their hands over their mouths. Others just shook their heads in disbelief.

"I can't believe it!" Rosette said.

"That's the saddest story I've ever heard," said Coral, petting the Walking Fish, who rested peacefully in her lap.

"And even when the whole world hated her, she still never quit trying to free the man she loved," Sleeping Beauty said.

"She never gave up hope," Skylene said.

Cinderella sat straight up in her throne. "*Hope*. That's it," she said, looking down at her daughter. "That's what I'm going to name her. Princess Hope Charming, the future queen."

"It's beautiful!" King Chance said, and kissed his newborn daughter on the forehead.

Everyone *aww*ed and clapped their approval.

"Then I believe it's time we christened Princess Hope with a few gifts," Emerelda said, and gestured to the fairies to get on their feet.

One by one, the fairies each blessed the princess with a christening spell. They gave her gifts of wisdom and health, of compassion and wealth, of pride and discipline, and lastly of beauty, although she already had plenty to spare.

"Would you like to hold her?" Cinderella asked Alex.

"Me?" Alex asked, pointing to herself. "Yes. I would be honored."

Cinderella gently placed her daughter into Alex's arms.

Alex wondered if the baby had any idea where or who it was. Did she know how special she already was just by having been born? Did she know she was a future queen of a kingdom in the Land of Stories? The baby yawned; perhaps she did know and was exhausted just thinking about it.

The doors of the ballroom opened and the twins saw a familiar face coming toward them; it was Sir Lampton, and he had an enormous grin on his face.

"Your Majesty, the Fairy Godmother has arrived," Sir Lampton said.

"Oh, splendid, Lampton," Cinderella said. "Would you let her know where we are?"

"Certainly, Your Highness," Lampton said. "But before she joins you, she would like to have a word with the children. *Alone*."

All the heads in the room turned to Alex and Conner, who gulped in unison.

"She's waiting in the clock tower," Lampton said.

The twins slowly walked out of the ballroom with Lampton. He guided them through the palace, staircase after staircase, up to the clock tower.

"It's great to see you two again," Lampton told the twins. "The Fairy Godmother has been looking for you two for quite some time now."

"That can't be good," Conner said. "Are we in trouble?"

Lampton didn't answer. The twins grew very worried by his silence. Alex pulled out the map and

the journal from her bag along with a piece of the glass slipper.

"If she's upset about something, we'll just explain ourselves from the very beginning," Alex said. "We haven't done anything wrong. *Have we?*"

"Of course not," Conner said. "Our intentions were always very good with everything we did. *Right?*"

The twins and Lampton ran out of stairs to climb and found a round door that led inside the clock tower. Lampton knocked lightly on the door.

"Come in," said a voice from inside.

"Here we go," Alex said to Conner. "Fingers crossed."

Lampton led the twins inside. The clock tower was gigantic. The twins felt like they were in the inside of an enormous antique clock as there were giant, turning gears and mechanisms everywhere you looked. They could see the entire kingdom through the clock face.

A short woman was standing with her back to the door, looking out over the kingdom. She wore a long, hooded, light blue overcoat that sparkled like the night sky.

"I'll leave you alone now," Lampton said. He promptly shut the door behind him and left the twins alone with the Fairy Godmother.

The twins cautiously tiptoed closer to the woman.

"Excuse me?" Conner asked. "Miss Fairy Godmother? You wanted to see us?"

The Fairy Godmother turned to face the children. She was a beautiful older woman with kind eyes and a radiant smile. Her hair was a light brown and was worn up in a gorgeous hairdo.

The twins froze.

"Grandma?" Alex gasped.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I'm so glad you're all right!" their grandmother said, and rushed over to the twins. She gave them the biggest and longest hug they had ever received from her. "Your mother and I have been so worried!"

The twins didn't hug her back; they couldn't. They could barely breathe. They were surprised they were still standing, because neither of them could feel their legs.

"How are you?" their grandma asked. "Are you hurt? Are you hungry? Do you need anything?"

"Grandma?" Alex asked softly. "Is it really you?"

"It's me, sweetheart," she said. "I'm really here."

"*You're* the Fairy Godmother?" Conner asked.

She smiled at them. "I am," she said, with sadness in her voice. "I'm so sorry, I never meant for you to find out this way—"

Their grandmother stopped speaking. Her gaze had landed on the object Alex was holding.

"Good heavens—what on earth are you doing with your father's old journal?" she asked.

Alex and Conner felt like they had swallowed their own hearts.

"This is *Dad's* journal?" Alex asked with big, bewildered eyes.

"We've been following *Dad's* journal this whole time?" Conner asked.

"I think I'm going to faint," Alex said.

Their grandmother pulled out a long crystal wand from inside her overcoat. She waved it, and a sofa magically appeared in the clock tower. She took the twins by the hands and sat them down on the sofa and let them catch their breath.

It took the twins by surprise. Even though she was the Fairy Godmother, Alex and Conner weren't expecting their *grandmother* to be capable of such magic.

Grandma took the journal from Alex and flipped through the pages, amazed that it had somehow found its way into their possession.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"It was given to us by our friend Froggy," Alex said. "We've been following it since we got here."

"We've been hunting down all the items for the Wishing Spell," Conner said.

"The Wishing Spell?" their grandma asked anxiously. "No wonder it was impossible to find you!"

"You and Dad are actually from here, then?" Alex asked. "I wasn't making it all up in my head?"

"And Dad wrote that journal?" Conner asked, his mind still stuck on the subject.

"Yes, yes, yes," their grandmother said. "It's all true. I gave this journal to him when he was a boy. I'm glad it was useful."

The twins had gotten used to their heads spinning with questions, but now they were spinning out of control. They didn't know which questions to ask first.

"So Dad wanted the Wishing Spell so he could travel into our world?" Conner asked.

"He wrote that he fell in love with a woman in our world," Alex said. *"Was it… Could it be…?"*

"Your mother, yes," their grandma said.

Alex and Conner exchanged a look, each seeing how the other was processing the information. Neither looked less shocked than the other.

“How long have you been a Fairy Godmother?” Alex asked.

“Why didn’t anyone ever tell us any of this?” Conner asked.

“I know you probably have a hundred questions,” their grandma said. “But before you worry yourselves too much, let me explain.”

“Please,” Conner said.

Their grandma took a deep breath. She didn’t know where or how to start.

“We always planned on telling you when you were older,” she said. “Your father was counting down the days until he could bring you here and show you around. Unfortunately, he never got a chance to. After he passed away, you two were going through so much already, your mother and I didn’t want to overwhelm you, so we decided to hold off.”

“So Mom knows about this place?” Alex asked.

“She’s never been here, but she knows enough,” their grandma said. “Your father and I, on the other hand, were both born and raised in this world. Before your father was born, and when I was just a young fairy in training, I accidentally discovered your world.”

“So, your cabin in the woods? Your blue car? It was all just for show?” Conner asked.

“Certainly not,” Grandma said. “I stay at that cabin during my travels, and I love that blue car. I wish people in this world knew about automobiles.”

“So how did you end up in our world to begin with?” Alex asked.

“It happened by total accident,” she said. “I had recently just finished a tour of the kingdoms, traveling to those who needed a helping hand, and I was anxious to help more. I waved my wand around me, I closed my eyes, and thought with all my heart, ‘I wish to go someplace where people need me the most,’ thinking I would just end up in a small village in the Northern Kingdom. When I opened my eyes, I knew I wasn’t in the kingdoms anymore.

“I kept it to myself for years before telling any of the other fairies about it. I met a group of children there who showed me around. I was fascinated by their world, but they were even more fascinated with stories about mine. They didn’t know anything about magic or fairies before I came along. Their world was so consumed with war and famine and disease… it was all they knew. They would sit for hours and listen to my stories about the world I came from. It seemed to take them away from all their troubles.

“I saw how the stories inspired them, how they gave them hope, how they gave them courage and strength, and how they learned lessons from them. It made children without families learn to love and trust a little more than they had before, and it put the sparkle back in the eyes of the children who were ill and had had their childhoods taken from them. I decided from then on that I would do as much as I could to make our stories, our history, as known as possible.

“To date, I am the only one who has had the gift to move between worlds, and I found it to be a great responsibility. I recruited Mother Goose and a few of the fairies to go with me into your world and spread these stories of ours. We found the children who needed to hear them the most, the ones who were down on their luck and needed a little magic, and the term *fairy tales* was born. Your world was moving so fast and growing so large, we couldn’t do it by ourselves anymore, so we asked people like the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen and a few others to help us over the years.”

“So, there *is* a time difference?” Alex said.

“Your world moves so much faster than ours,” Grandma said. “I visited once a week, and every

time I returned it seemed as if decades and decades had gone by."

"That's why the stories have been in our world for so long!" Conner said.

"Oh no!" Alex exclaimed. "Mom! Does that mean she's grown into an old woman while we've been here?"

"No," their grandmother said. "You see, children, there *was* a time difference. But then something truly magical happened that changed all of that."

"What?" Conner asked.

"You two were born," Grandma said with a smile.

The twins looked at each other, amazed.

"Why are we so special?" Conner asked.

"Because, sometimes magic has a mind of its own," she said.

Grandma looked down at her hands and at her wedding ring.

"Your grandfather loved your world and traveled with me whenever I went. He was the love of my life, but he unfortunately died shortly before your father was born. I raised your father here on my own, but I continued to visit the other world from time to time, although it was painful, because it reminded me of your grandfather.

"Your father was always an adventurous boy. From an early age, he was constantly running off and exploring different lands throughout the kingdoms. He was always very curious about the other world, and I promised to take him one day when he was an adult. Many years later, he came with us to a children's hospital to read stories to the sick children. Your mother had just started nursing there, and I knew from the minute he laid eyes on her that his heart didn't belong to himself anymore.

"Naturally, I forbid him from staying or ever coming back with the fairies and myself again. It was selfish of me, but I was scared he would get lost in the time difference of the worlds and would live the rest of his life without me; I couldn't lose my son after losing your grandfather. But his love for your mother was too strong, and he found his own way back by using the Wishing Spell. I had no choice but to give him my blessing and let him go. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do as a mother.

"However, as soon as you two were born, the most peculiar thing happened: Your world and this world slowly started to move at similar speeds. It's the greatest magic I have seen in my lifetime.

"Being your father's children means that you have part of this world inside of you; you always have. You two are the first children of both worlds; you're the bridge that connects them."

The twins were so relieved to know that their mother would be the same age when they returned.

"You mean," Alex began to ask, but paused because it almost seemed too good to be true, "that Conner and I are *part fairy*?"

"I suppose so, if you put it that way," she said.

Alex placed both of her hands over her heart and tears came to her eyes. Conner rolled his eyes and sighed.

"That's wonderful!" Alex said.

"Oh, great," Conner said sarcastically. "The guys at school can *never* hear about this."

"How else did you think you set off my old storybook?" Grandma said.

Alex sat straight up in her seat. She remembered the night in bed when she was holding *The Land of Stories* and wishing with all her heart to travel inside it, the first night she discovered it wasn't an average book.

"You mean, *I* did that?" she asked. "I made *The Land of Stories* bring us here?"

"Yes," Grandma said. A proud smile filled her face.

Alex couldn't believe it. *She* was magic. *She'd* made it happen.

"It all makes so much sense now!" Alex said. "In the castle the Evil Queen was hiding in, *my* tear activated the Wishing Spell! And I saw my reflection in one of her magic mirrors! I had wings! I thought I was just seeing things!"

"Evil Queen?" their grandma asked. "It sounds like you two have had even more of an adventure here than I thought!"

"You can say that again," Conner said.

"I look forward to hearing all about it," their grandma said. "Your mother has been worried sick! She's had to give your school every excuse known to man as to why you two have been gone. I think it's time I took you home."

Home. She was going to take them *home*. Never had a word sounded so beautiful.

"Can you do that?" Conner said.

"You'd be amazed at the things your grandma can do," she laughed. But her look faded as she sadly looked down at the journal that had belonged to her late son. "Amazing, isn't it? Even in death, your father managed to show you around this place. It had always been his dream."

Alex and Conner had always thought that their father was amazing, but until now, they never knew just how amazing he actually was.

The twins and their grandmother left the clock tower and caught Sir Lampton leaning on the door, closely listening to their conversation. He escorted them back down the stairs to the ballroom.

"I knew your father," Lampton whispered into the twins' ears. "We grew up together. I knew you must have been his children the very second I saw you. That's why I put the glass slipper in your bag."

The twins couldn't even acknowledge it with a smile. Their minds were already overloaded.

They walked into the ballroom, and everyone stood at the sight of the Fairy Godmother.

"Everyone, please have a seat. I've come to bless the baby princess with a gift, and then I'm going to take my grandchildren home," she said, and put her arms around Alex and Conner.

"Grandchildren?" Cinderella asked. "I had no idea! Why, that practically makes us family!" she said, smiling at the twins.

"Did you hear that, Alex?" Conner said, leaning close to his sister. "Cinderella herself just said we're practically her family!"

"I know," Alex peeped. "And I'm trying not to cry."

The Fairy Godmother took the newborn princess into her arms. The twins were excited to see their grandmother in action.

"She's beautiful, dear," she said to Cinderella. "My gift to the princess will be bravery. She may need it in the years to come."

The Fairy Godmother kissed the newborn's cheek. Her lips left a sparkly mark on the infant's face, and it slowly faded away as the gift was absorbed.

"Before I go, I have one more gift to give," the Fairy Godmother said, and took out her long crystal wand. "Will the gentleman known as Froggy please come to the front of the room?"

Froggy, who had been partially hiding behind the Charming kings, cautiously met the Fairy Godmother in the middle of the room.

"Thank you so much for looking out for my grandchildren," the twins' grandmother said. "I will never be able to thank you enough, but for now, I'd like to take away the curse put upon you."

Froggy's mouth opened extra wide. He kept looking back and forth between the twins and the Fairy Godmother.

"I... I... I..." he started, but couldn't finish.

The Fairy Godmother waved her wand, and the curse cast upon him blew away like dandelion seeds in the wind. Froggy wasn't froggy anymore, he was a *man.* He was a very attractive man, too, with dark hair and eyes that illuminated the entire room. It was shocking for the twins to see him as anything else.

"Charlie?" King Chance said. "Is that *you*?"

The Charming brothers all leaned closer to him. They stared at him as if they were looking at a ghost.

"Hello, brother," Froggy said. "It's been a long time."

The Charmings' amazement eventually wore off and turned into celebration. They ran over to their long-lost brother and vigorously embraced him. The room erupted with joy at the long-overdue reunion. Red Riding Hood was quietly blushing to herself. She was looking at Prince Charlie in a completely new way; he wasn't the friendly frog man who'd saved her in the collapsing castle anymore: He was husband material.

"We thought you were dead!" Chandler said, rubbing his brother's head.

"We searched every kingdom for you!" Chase said, patting him on the back.

"Now you know why you couldn't find me," Charlie said, and shrugged.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Chance asked.

"I was ashamed," Charlie said. "I didn't know any better. I thought I had to hide. Please forgive me."

The twins couldn't believe it. Now they knew why he had been acting so strange when they'd arrived.

"So you're a prince?" Alex asked with a gigantic smile on her face. "You forgot to mention that part."

"My apologies," Charlie said. "I could have sworn I mentioned it over lily pad tea."

They laughed together. Charlie ran over to the twins and hugged them almost as tightly as his brothers had just hugged him.

"Thank you," Charlie said, "for inspiring me to come out of that hole in the ground!"

"Thank *you*," Alex said.

"I'm still calling you Froggy," Conner said.

The Fairy Godmother waved her crystal wand one last time, and a door appeared in the middle of the ballroom. She walked over to the twins and placed a hand on both of their shoulders.

"It's time," she said.

The twins recognized the door immediately; it was the front door of their rental house. They had never been so happy to see it. A light was shining through it; they knew their mother was waiting for them on the other side.

All the kings, queens, and fairies in the room looked at Alex and Conner sweetly. Although most of them had had their predicaments with the twins, they were sad to see them go.

"Say good-bye," Grandma told the twins.

Conner couldn't wait any longer and ran straight to the door.

"Bye!" Conner yelled at everyone in the room without looking at them. He ran through the door and disappeared, home at last.

Alex looked up at her grandmother. "Will we ever come back?" she asked, hoping with all her heart for the answer she wanted to hear.

"Someday," her grandma said.

Alex took a step toward the men and women she had grown up reading about her entire life. She could have sworn she had had a dream just like this once. She had been meaning to say something and decided this might be her last chance to say it.

"I know this may not make any sense, but thank you for always being there for me," Alex said. "You're the best friends I've ever had."

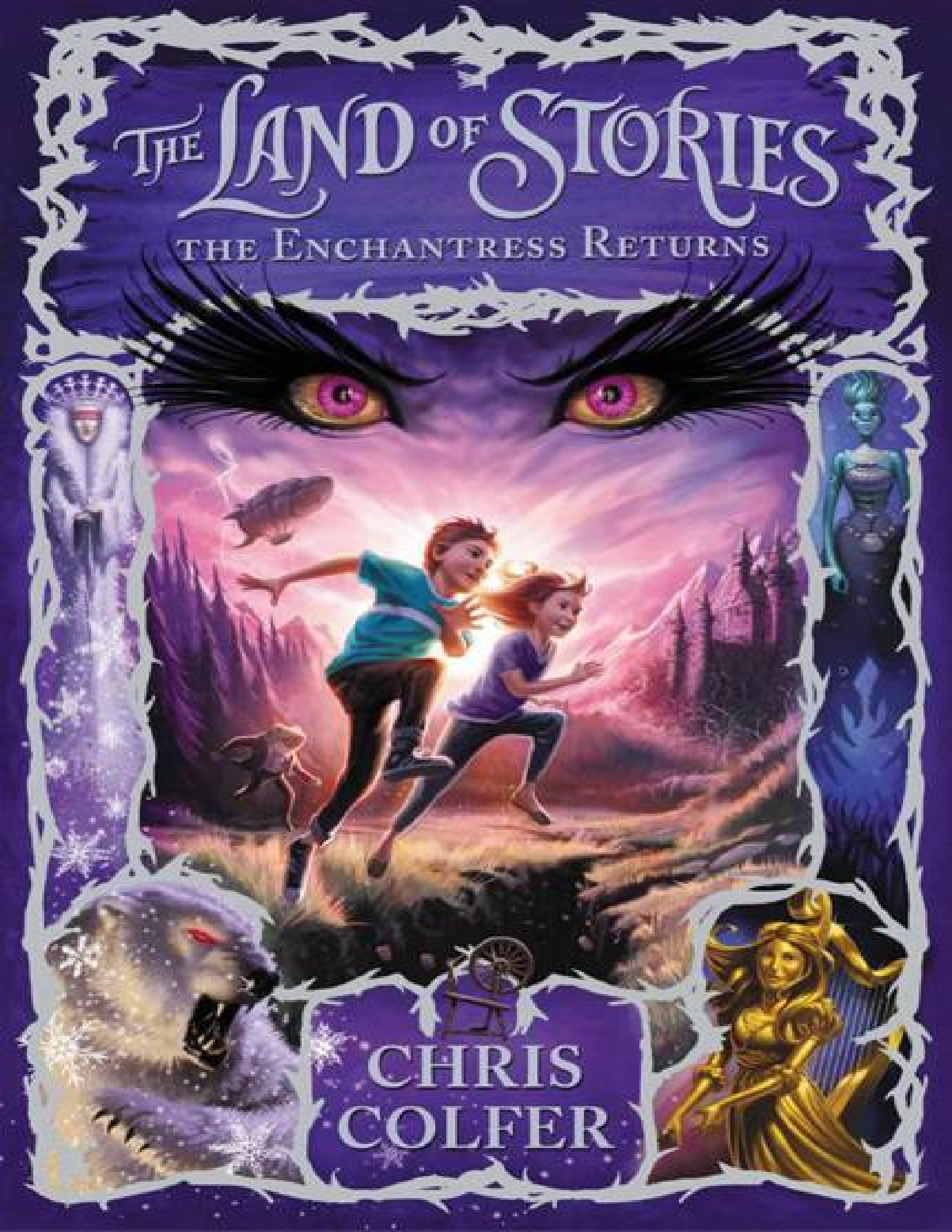
They didn't quite understand what she meant, but they were all very touched by her words.

"Come along, dear," her grandma said, and escorted her to the door.

Alex wiped away the tears that had been brought on by saying farewell. She couldn't help but smile as she walked through the door with her grandmother, though, because she knew in her heart it wasn't really *good-bye*.

The Land of Stories

The Enchantress Returns



Chris Colfer

The Land of Stories

The Enchantress Returns

CHRIS COLFER

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Begin Reading
Table of Contents
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To Hannah,
for being the bravest, strongest, and
most honest person I know, and for showing
that it's impossible to be "cursed" when
one has a heart as courageous as yours.
Also, for giving me my first black eye—you were
four, I was nine. It still hurts. Bubba loves you.

“THE WORLD WILL NOT BE DESTROYED BY THOSE WHO DO EVIL, BUT BY THOSE WHO WATCH THEM WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

PROLOGUE

THE RISE AND THE RETURN

The East was in a period of great celebration. Daily parades marched through the village streets, every home and shop was decorated in colorful banners and wreaths, and handfuls of flower petals were thrown and floated through the air. Each citizen smiled, proud of what they had recently accomplished.

It had taken over a decade for the Sleeping Kingdom to fully recover from the horrific sleeping curse of the past, but at last, it had restored itself to the prosperous nation it had been before. The people of the East charged into the future, reclaiming their home as the Eastern Kingdom.

A week's worth of celebrations concluded in the great hall of Queen Sleeping Beauty's castle. It was so crowded the entire kingdom seemed to be there; many had to stand or sit on windowsills. The queen herself; her husband, King Chase; and their royal advisor sat at a high table overlooking the festivities.

A small performance was taking place in the center of the hall. Thespians reenacted Sleeping Beauty's christening, portraying the fairies who had blessed her and the evil Enchantress who had cursed her to die after pricking her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel. Luckily, another fairy reformed the curse, so when the princess eventually pricked her finger, she and the entire kingdom simply went to sleep. They slept for a hundred years and the performers took great delight in re-creating the moment King Chase kissed her and awoke them all.

"I think it's time we dispose of our little gifts from the queen," a woman shouted from the back of the hall. She stood up on a table and cheerfully gestured to her wrist.

Everyone in the kingdom wore flexible bands around their wrists made from tree sap. In the years prior, Queen Sleeping Beauty had instructed them to snap their wrists with them whenever they felt unnecessary fatigue. The bands helped the citizens stay awake, fighting off the lingering effects of the curse.

Fortunately, the bands weren't needed anymore. Everyone in the great hall ripped them off their wrists and threw them happily in the air.

“Your Majesty, won’t you tell us again where you learned a trick like that?” a man asked the queen about the bands.

“You’ll think strangely of me when I tell you,” Sleeping Beauty said. “It was from a child. He and his sister were visiting the castle a year ago. He said he had used a band to keep himself awake in school and suggested the kingdom try it.”

“Remarkable!” the man said and laughed with her.

“Fascinating, isn’t it? I believe the most extraordinary ideas come from children,” the queen said. “If only we all could be so perceptive, we would find the simplest solutions to the greatest problems are right under our noses.”

Sleeping Beauty lightly tapped the side of her glass with a spoon. She stood and addressed the eager people.

“My friends,” Sleeping Beauty said, raising her glass. “Today marks a very special day in our history and an even better day for our future. As of this morning, our kingdom’s trading deals, crop production, and overall consciousness have not only been restored but *improved* since the sleeping curse was cast upon this land!”

Her people cheered so loudly the castle shook with joy. Sleeping Beauty looked to her side and shared a warm smile with her husband.

“We should not forget the horrible curse of the past, but when we look back upon the dark time, let us remember how we triumphed over it,” Sleeping Beauty continued. Small tears formed in her eyes. “Let it be a warning to all who try to interfere with our prosperity: The Eastern Kingdom is here to stay and stands united against any force of evil that gets in our way!”

The approving roar was so loud it actually knocked a man off the windowsill he sat on.

“I have never been prouder to be among you than tonight! Here’s to you!” the jubilant queen said, and the room joined her in sipping from their glasses.

“All hail Queen Beauty!” a man in the middle of the hall shouted.

“All hail the queen!” the rest cheered with him. “All hail the queen! All hail the queen!”

Sleeping Beauty waved at them graciously and took a seat. The festivities continued into the night, but just before midnight the queen was

overcome by a strange sensation—a feeling she hadn't felt in years.

"Well, isn't that bizarre?" Sleeping Beauty said to herself, looking off into the distance with a smirk.

"Is there something wrong, my love?" King Chase asked.

Sleeping Beauty stood and headed toward the staircase behind them.

"You'll have to excuse me, dear," the queen said to her husband. "I'm rather *sleepy*."

She was just as surprised to say it as he was to hear it, because Sleeping Beauty hadn't slept in years. The queen had made a promise to her people that she wouldn't rest until the kingdom was properly restored; now, looking around at all the joyous faces in the hall, both the king and the queen knew that the promise had been fulfilled.

"Good night, my love, sleep well," King Chase said and kissed her hand.

In her chambers, the queen changed into her favorite nightgown and slipped into her bed for the first time in over a decade. She felt as if she were being reunited with old friends. She had forgotten the feeling of the cool sheets against her legs and arms, the softness of her pillow, and the sinking sensation as she settled into the mattress.

The sounds of celebration could be heard in the queen's chambers, but she didn't mind: They were actually soothing to her. Sleeping Beauty took a deep breath and fell into a very deep sleep—almost as deep as the one during the one hundred years' curse, except she knew she could awaken anytime she wished.

When King Chase joined her later, he couldn't help but smile at the sight of his wife peacefully sleeping. He hadn't seen her look this way since the day he saw her for the first time.

In the great hall, the celebration finally concluded. The lamps and fireplaces were extinguished throughout the castle. The servants finished cleaning up and were dismissed to their quarters.

All was finally quiet in the castle. But a few hours before dawn, the silence was broken.

Sleeping Beauty and King Chase were awoken by a thunderous banging on their chamber door. The king and queen instantly sat up.

"Your Majesty!" a man shouted from the other side of the door. "Forgive me, but we must come inside!"

The door burst open and the royal advisor ran into the room, followed by a dozen suited guards. They surrounded the bed.

“What on earth is going on?!” King Chase yelled. “How dare you barge into our—”

“I’m so sorry, Your Highness, but we must get the queen to safety immediately,” the advisor said.

“Safety?” Sleeping Beauty asked.

“We’ll explain on the way there, Your Majesty,” the advisor said. “But right now we must get you into the carriage as fast as possible—*only you.* Traveling alone will be much less conspicuous than a carriage transporting you and the king.”

The advisor looked at her with frantic eyes, begging her to oblige. The queen froze.

“Chase?!” Sleeping Beauty said and looked to her husband—she wasn’t sure what to do.

The king was at a loss for words. “If they say you need to go, you must go,” was all he could muster.

“I cannot leave my people,” Sleeping Beauty said.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, you’re no good to anyone dead,” the advisor said.

Sleeping Beauty felt the pit of her stomach drop. What did he mean, *dead*?

Before Sleeping Beauty knew it, the guards had lifted her out of the bed and onto her feet. They quickly escorted her and the advisor to the door. She didn’t even get to say good-bye.

They rushed down a spiral staircase to the lower levels of the castle. The stone steps were rough on the queen’s bare feet.

“Someone please tell me what is happening!” Sleeping Beauty said.

“We must get you out of the kingdom as quickly as possible,” the advisor said.

“Why?” she asked, starting to fight off the guards escorting her. No one replied, so she stopped in the middle of the stairs, solid as a rock. “I won’t move another step until someone informs me! I am the queen! I have the right to know!”

The advisor’s face went pale.

“I don’t mean to alarm you any more, Your Majesty,” he said, his jaw quivering. “But shortly after midnight, after all the guests had gone home, two soldiers on duty near the front of the castle witnessed a bright flash of light, and a *spinning wheel* appeared out of thin air.”

Sleeping Beauty’s eyes grew wide and the color faded from her face.

“They didn’t think it was anything serious—a foolish prank to spoil our party this evening, perhaps,” he continued. “The soldiers went to inspect the spinning wheel and it burst into flames. As soon as it did, something else happened.”

“And what was that?” she said.

“The vines and thornbushes that covered the castle during the sleeping curse—the plants that were cleared out and dumped in the Thornbush Pit—are *growing back*,” he told her. “I’ve never seen anything grow so fast; nearly half the castle is covered already. The plants are consuming the entire kingdom.”

“Are you telling me that the curse in the Thornbush Pit has spread throughout the kingdom?” Sleeping Beauty asked.

“No, Your Majesty,” the advisor said with a heavy gulp. “That was just an old witch’s curse. This is dark magic—*very powerful dark magic*! The kind our kingdom has only been exposed to once before.”

“No.” Sleeping Beauty gasped and covered her mouth. “You don’t mean—”

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” the advisor said. “Now please cooperate with us—we must get you out of the kingdom as quickly as possible.”

The guards grabbed hold of the queen again and they traveled deeper into the castle; this time she did not fight them. They ran down the stairs until there were no more stairs to descend. They shot through a pair of wooden doors and Sleeping Beauty found herself in the castle stables.

There were four carriages in front of her. Each was circled by a dozen soldiers on horses and ready to depart at any second. Three of the carriages were bright and golden, of the queen’s personal collection, but she was escorted to the fourth, a small, dull, and unassuming one. The soldiers surrounding this carriage weren’t dressed in armor like the others but were disguised as farmers and townspeople.

The guards lifted the queen inside it. There was barely enough room inside for her to sit.

“And my husband?” Sleeping Beauty asked as she put a hand out to prevent them from shutting the door behind her.

“He’ll be all right, ma’am,” the advisor said. “The king and I will be traveling as soon as we send out the decoy carriages. We’ve had this planned in the event the castle should ever be under attack. Trust me; it’s the safest way.”

“I never authorized such plans!” Sleeping Beauty said.

“No, it was your parents’ order,” the advisor said. “It was one of the last things they instructed before they died.”

This news made the queen’s heart pound even harder. Her parents had spent the majority of their lives trying to protect her, and even in death, they were still trying.

“Where am I going?” she asked.

“The Fairy Kingdom for now,” the advisor said. “You’ll be safest with the Fairy Council. The decoy carriages will be sent in other directions as a distraction. Now, you must hurry.”

He gently pushed her the rest of the way inside and shut the carriage door firmly behind her. Even the dozen guards surrounding her small carriage did little to comfort her. She knew the situation was beyond their ability to protect her.

The advisor nodded to the decoy carriages and they set off. A few moments later he nodded to her driver and, like a cannonball, the queen’s carriage shot off into the night, the horses galloping at full speed.

Through her carriage’s tiny windows, Sleeping Beauty saw the horrors that the advisor had described to her.

Scattered all across the castle grounds she saw soldiers and servants fighting off the rogue thornbushes and vines growing around them. The plants grew straight out of the ground and attacked them, like serpents wrapping around their prey. The vines crept up the sides of the castle, breaking through the windows and pulling people out, dangling them hundreds of feet in the air.

Thorns and vines shot out of the ground toward Sleeping Beauty’s carriage, but the soldiers were quick to slice them with their swords.

Queen Sleeping Beauty had never felt so helpless in her life. She saw villagers—some within reach of her carriage—fall victim to the leafy monsters. There was nothing she could do to help them. All she could do

was watch and hope she could find help once she reached the Fairy Kingdom. The guilt of leaving her husband and kingdom behind weighed heavily on her, but the advisor was right: She'd be no good to anyone dead.

The castle grew smaller and smaller behind her as the carriage traveled away from the devastation. Soon they were passing through a forest and all the queen could see outside were dark trees around them for miles.

Even after an hour of traveling, Sleeping Beauty was as scared as ever. She kept whispering to herself under her breath, *"We're almost there.… We're almost there…"* though she had no idea how close they were.

Suddenly, a high-pitched *whoosh*ing sound came from the trees. Sleeping Beauty looked out the window just in time to see a soldier and his horse thrown high into the forest beside the path. Another *whoosh*ing sound swooped toward them, and another soldier and his horse were thrown into the trees on the other side of the path. *They had been found*.

Every other second was filled with the terrified cries of the soldiers and horses as they were flung into the forest. Whatever was out there, it was picking them off one by one.

Sleeping Beauty crouched down, trembling, on the floorboard of the carriage. She knew it was only a matter of time before all the soldiers were gone.

One final swoop took the remaining horses and soldiers with it; their cries echoed in the night. The carriage crashed to the ground, falling on its side and skidding across the ground until coming to a stop. Everything was quiet in the forest now. There wasn't a sound of wounded soldiers or horses to be heard. The queen was all alone.

Sleeping Beauty crawled through the carriage door and carefully made her way down to the ground. She was limping and clutched her left wrist but was so frightened she barely felt her injuries.

Was the attack over? Could she safely call for help or search for survivors? Surely, if whatever was out there wanted her dead, she would have been killed by now.

Sleeping Beauty was just about to call for help when a blinding flash of violet light filled the forest. The queen screamed and fell to the ground, covering her face—but the flash lasted only a second. She smelled smoke and got to her feet and looked around. The entire forest was ablaze and every tree had been turned into a *spinning wheel*.

There was no denying it now; the kingdom's greatest fear had come true.

"*The Enchantress,*" Sleeping Beauty whispered to herself. "*She's back.*"

CHAPTER ONE

A TRAIN OF THOUGHTS

The subtle jerks of the train rocked Alex Bailey awake. She looked at the empty seats around her while she remembered where she was. A long sigh came out of the thirteen-year-old girl and she neatly fixed a strand of strawberry-blonde hair that had escaped her headband.

"Not again," she whispered to herself.

Alex hated dozing off in public places. She was a very smart and serious young woman and never wanted to give the wrong impression. Luckily for her, she was one of only a few people on the five o'clock train back into town, so her secret was safe.

Alex was an exceptionally bright student and always had been. In fact, she was so advanced she was part of an honors program that allowed her to take an additional class at the community college in the next town.

Since she was too young to drive and her mother worked the majority of the day at a children's hospital, every Thursday after school Alex would ride her bike to the train station and travel the short distance into the next town for her classes.

It was a questionable trip for a young girl to make by herself, and her mother had had reservations at first, but she knew Alex could handle it. This short journey was nothing compared to the things Alex had handled in the past.

Alex loved being a part of the honors program. For the first time, she was able to learn about art and history and other languages in an environment where everyone *wanted* to be there. When her professors asked questions, Alex was one of many people to raise her hand with the answer.

Another perk of the train ride was the downtime Alex got to herself. She would gaze out the window and let her thoughts wander while the train traveled. It was the most relaxing part of her day, and many times she'd find herself drifting off to sleep, but only on rare occasions like today would she accidentally drift off completely.

Normally, she would wake feeling embarrassed, but this time Alex's embarrassment was laced with annoyance. She had just been having a

disheartening dream: a dream she had had many times in the last year.

She dreamed she was running barefoot in a beautiful forest with her twin brother, Conner.

“I’ll race you to the cottage!” Conner said with a huge smile. He shared his sister’s looks but, thanks to a recent growth spurt, was now a few inches taller than her.

“You’re on!” Alex said with a laugh, and the race began.

They chased each other through trees and over grassy fields without a care in the world. There were no trolls or wolves or evil queens for them to worry about, because, wherever Alex and Conner were, they knew they were safe.

Eventually a small cottage came into view. The twins bolted toward it, putting all their energy into one final sprint.

“I win!” Alex declared when both of her open palms touched the front door a millisecond before her brother’s.

“Not fair!” Conner said. “My feet are flatter than yours!”

Alex giggled and tried opening the door, but it was locked. She knocked, but no one answered.

“That’s funny,” Alex said. “Grandma knew we were coming to visit; I wonder why she locked the door.”

She and her brother peered into the window. They could see their grandmother inside, sitting in a rocking chair near the fireplace. She seemed sad, and slowly rocked back and forth.

“Grandma, we’re here!” Alex said and cheerfully tapped on the window. “Open the door!”

Her grandmother didn’t move.

“Grandma?” Alex asked, tapping on the window harder. “Grandma, it’s us! We want to visit you!”

Her grandma raised her head slightly and looked up at them through the window but remained seated.

“Let us in!” Alex said, tapping on the glass even harder.

Conner shook his head. “It’s no use, Alex. We can’t go in.” He turned away and headed back in the direction they came from.

“Conner, don’t walk away!” Alex said.

“Why bother?” he said, looking back at her. “Clearly she doesn’t want us in there.”

Alex began banging on the window as hard as possible without breaking it. “Grandma, please let us in! We want to come inside! *Please!*”

Grandma looked up at her with a blank stare.

“Grandma, I don’t know what I did wrong, but whatever it is, I’m sorry! Please let me come back inside!” Alex said as tears began to spill down her face. *“I want to come in! I want to come in!”*

Grandma’s plain expression turned into a frown and she shook her head. Alex realized she wasn’t going to be let in, and every time she came to this realization in the dream, she would wake up.

It might not have been a pleasant dream, but it had felt so good to be back in a forest and to see her grandmother’s face again.… It was obvious to her what the dream represented, and had been since the first time she had dreamed it.

However, Alex felt something different when she awoke this time. She couldn’t help but feel as if someone had been watching her while she was asleep.

When she had first awoken, although she hadn’t paid much attention to it at first, she could have sworn she saw her grandmother sitting across from her on the train.

Was this was an actual sighting or just her imagination getting the best of her? Alex couldn’t deny the possibility that it had been real. Her grandmother was capable of many things.…

It had been over a year since Alex and Conner Bailey had discovered their family’s biggest secret. When they were given an old storybook from their grandmother, they’d never expected it would magically transport them into the fairy-tale world, and never in their wildest dreams had they expected that their grandmother and late father were *from* this world.

Traveling from kingdom to kingdom and befriending the characters they grew up reading about had been the adventure of their lives. But the biggest surprise of all was when the twins learned their own grandmother was Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother.

Their grandmother eventually found them and took them back home to their anxious mother.

“I had to tell the school you both had chicken pox,” Charlotte, the twins’ mother, said. “I had to come up with a good excuse for why you had been gone for two weeks and thought ‘traveling in another dimension’ would probably raise a few eyebrows.”

“Chicken pox?” Conner said. “Mom, you couldn’t come up with anything *cooler*? Like a spider bite or food poisoning?”

“Did you know where we were the whole time?” Alex asked.

“It wasn’t difficult to figure out,” Charlotte said. “When I got home from work I went into your room and found the *Land of Stories* book on the floor. It was still glowing.”

She looked over at the large emerald storybook held tightly in Grandma’s hands.

“Were you worried?” Conner asked.

“Of course,” Charlotte said. “Not necessarily for your safety, but for your sanity. I was worried the experience would overwhelm and frighten you, so I called your grandmother immediately. Luckily, she was still in this world, traveling with her friends. But after the second week of not knowing where you were… well, let’s just say I pray I never have to experience that again.”

“So you knew about *everything*?” Alex asked.

“Yes,” Charlotte said. “Your dad was going to tell you eventually; he just never got the chance.”

“How did you find out?” Conner asked. “When did Dad tell you? Did you even believe him at first?”

Charlotte smiled at the memory. “From the minute I saw your father, I knew there was something different about him,” she said. “I had just started my first week of nursing at the children’s hospital when I saw your grandmother and her group of friends come to read stories to the patients. But I was completely smitten by the handsome man who was with them. He was so peculiar; he stared around in amazement at everything. I thought he was going to faint when he saw the television.”

“It was John’s first trip to this world,” Grandma said with a smile.

“He asked me to give him a tour of the hospital, and I did,” Charlotte continued. “He was so fascinated to learn about it: the surgeries we

performed, the medicines we used, the patients we treated. He asked if we could meet again later after I was done working so I could tell him more. We ended up dating for two months and fell in love. But then, strangely, he disappeared without warning and I didn't see him again for three whole years."

The twins looked to their grandmother, knowing a bit of the story already.

"I made him go back to the fairy-tale world with me, and forbid him to return," Grandma said and slumped a tad. "I had my reasons, as you know, but I was very wrong."

"And that's when he discovered the Wishing Spell and started to collect the items like us, so he could find a way back to you," Alex said excitedly.

"And it really didn't take him that long; it just seemed like it because we hadn't been born yet, and there was still a time difference between the worlds," Conner added.

Charlotte and Grandma both nodded.

"I eventually saw him again at the hospital," Charlotte said. "He looked so frail and dirty, like he had been to war and back. He looked at me and said, *'You have no idea what I went through to get back to you.'* We were married a month later and became parents a year after that. So to answer your question, no, it wasn't hard to accept that your dad was from another world, because somehow I had known all along."

Alex reached into her bag and pulled out the journal their father had kept while he was collecting the Wishing Spell items, the same journal they had followed while collecting the items themselves.

"Here, Mom," Alex said. "Now you can know exactly how much Dad loved you."

Charlotte looked down at the journal, almost afraid to take it. She flipped it open and her eyes watered as she saw her late husband's handwriting.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she said.

"Just to let you know," Conner said, "me and Alex did all the same stuff. We're pretty great ourselves. Just keep that in mind if you ever feel inspired to give us an allowance in the future."

Charlotte playfully glared at her son; they knew she couldn't afford to give them allowances. Since their dad died, she'd had a hard time supporting the family and paying off debts from his funeral. But that got Alex thinking: With all the connections their family had in the fairy-tale world, why exactly had their lives been so tough the last year?

"Mom," Alex said, "why have we been struggling so much when all this time Grandma could have just waved her wand and made everything better for us?"

Conner looked up at his mother, thinking the same question. Their grandmother went quiet; it wasn't her place to say.

"Because your father didn't want that," Charlotte said. "Your father loved this world so much; it's where we met, it's where we had you two, and it's where he wanted to raise you. He had come from a world of kings and queens and magic, a world of entitlement and undeserved luxury that he thought ruined people's character. He wanted you guys to grow up in a place you could get anything you wanted if you worked hard enough for it, and although there have been times a little magic would have gone a long way, I've tried to respect that."

Alex and Conner looked at each other; maybe their dad was right. Could they have managed what they had done in the last weeks if they hadn't been raised that way? Could they have collected all the Wishing Spell items or stood up to the Evil Queen if he hadn't taught them how to believe in themselves?

"So what happens now?" Conner asked.

"What do you mean, Conner?" Grandma said.

"Well, clearly our lives are going to be totally different now, right?" he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I mean, after two weeks of barely surviving encounters with trolls, wolves, goblins, witches, and evil queens, we can't be expected to go to school again. We're too mentally distraught, right, Alex?"

Charlotte and Grandma looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"So I'm guessing that means we still have to go to school?" Conner asked. The twinkle in his eye faded away.

"Nice try," Charlotte said. "Every family has its issues, but that doesn't mean you get to drop out of school because of it."

“Thank goodness,” Alex said with a sigh. “I was afraid he was on to something for a minute.”

Grandma looked up at the clock. “It’s almost sunrise,” she said. “We’ve been talking all night. I better get going now.”

“When will we see you again?” Alex asked. “When can we go back to the Land of Stories?” Alex had wanted to ask that question since the moment they left. Grandma looked down at her feet and thought for a moment before responding.

“You’ve had an awfully big adventure, even by grown-up standards,” Grandma said. “Right now you need to focus on being twelve-year-olds in this world. Be kids while you still can, children. But I’ll take you back one day, I promise.”

It wasn’t the answer she wanted, but Alex nodded. There was one more question she had been meaning to ask all night.

“Will you ever teach us magic, Grandma?” Alex asked with wide eyes. “I mean, since Conner and I are part fairy, it would be nice to know a thing or two.”

“I completely forgot about that!” Conner said, slapping an open palm to his forehead. “Please leave me out of this. *I don’t want to be a fairy*—can’t stress that enough.”

Grandma went silent. She looked to Charlotte, who only shrugged.

“When the time is right, sweetheart, I would love nothing more,” Grandma said. “But right now the Fairy Council and I are working some things out, things that are pretty time-consuming but that you don’t need to worry yourselves about. As soon as we move past it, I would love to teach you magic.”

Grandma hugged her grandchildren and kissed the tops of their heads.

“I think it might be best if I take this with me,” Grandma said, referring to the *Land of Stories* book. “We don’t want history repeating itself.”

She headed toward the front door, but just as she reached for the doorknob, she stopped and looked back at them.

“I forgot, I didn’t drive here,” Grandma said with a smirk. “Looks like I’ll have to leave the *old-fashioned fairy way.* Good-bye, children, I love you with all my heart.”

And slowly, Grandma began to disappear, fading into soft, sparkling clouds.

"Okay, now *that* is something I'd like to learn how to do," Conner said. He waved his hands through the sparkles in the air. "Sign me up for *that* lesson."

Alex yawned contagiously and her brother followed.

"You kids must be exhausted," Charlotte said. "Why don't you go to bed? I'm taking tomorrow off so I can be here with you guys, in case you have any more questions. And because I've just missed you."

"In that case, I've got an important question," Conner said. "What's for breakfast? I'm starving."

Alex's train finally reached her station. She retrieved her bike from the bike rack and pedaled home, still thinking about her grandmother.

Alex had expected to live a dual-worldly life after discovering the fairy-tale world. She imagined spending summers and holidays with her brother in the Fairy Kingdom or Cinderella's Palace with their grandmother. She imagined a brand-new life of magic and adventure would begin immediately. Sadly, Alex's expectations weren't met.

More than a year had gone by since the night their grandmother disappeared. They hadn't received a single letter or phone call explaining why she had been gone. She missed every holiday and their birthday—days she *never* missed. And to make matters worse, the twins hadn't been back to the Land of Stories, either.

The twins couldn't help but be angry with their grandmother. How could she just disappear and never make contact again? How could she take them to a place they had been dreaming about since they were kids and then never let them return?

Their grandmother herself had even said it; a part of the Land of Stories lived inside them—so who was she to keep it from them?

"Your grandmother is a very busy woman," Charlotte would tell Alex whenever the subject came up. "She loves you very much. She probably just has her hands full at the moment. We'll hear from her soon enough."

This wasn’t enough to put Alex at ease. As more time went by, she began worrying whether her grandmother was all right—sometimes wondering if she was even *alive*. Alex hoped nothing had happened to her and that she was okay. She missed her hugs more than anything.

Life without their dad had been the most difficult thing the twins had ever experienced. But life without their dad *and* grandmother was nearly impossible.

“What do you think is going on?” Alex asked Conner on one occasion.

“I don’t know,” Conner said with a heavy sigh. “The last thing she said to us was that she and the other fairies were working something out. Maybe it’s just taking longer than they expected?”

“Maybe,” Alex said. “But I have a feeling that whatever it was, it’s much worse than she was letting on. What else would be keeping her away from us for so long?”

Conner just shrugged. “I don’t think Grandma would ever intentionally avoid us or exclude us from anything,” he said.

“I’m just worried about her,” Alex said.

“Alex,” Conner said with a raised eyebrow, “the woman is magic and has lived for hundreds of years. What is there to worry about?”

Alex sighed. “I suppose you’re right. She better have a great excuse next time we see her.”

Unfortunately, “next time” didn’t seem like it was happening anytime soon.

It was unsurprising that the situation had started affecting her dreams, but more than that, Alex was *depressed*. Ever since she had returned from the Land of Stories, she’d felt like a part of her was missing. The magical dimension had filled the emptiness she’d felt after losing her dad, and the emptiness grew every day she couldn’t go back.

The weekly trips to the college were always a major trigger for feeling this way. College was a place that represented the future, and even though Alex was years away from actually going to college, she didn’t like planning any future that didn’t involve the Land of Stories. How could she live a normal life when she had proof that she was not normal?

Alex fantasized about moving to the Land of Stories one day. Could her grandmother teach her enough magic for Alex to become an official

fairy? Could Alex become a member of the Fairy Council or, better yet, the Happily Ever After Assembly?

Alex tried doing magic on her own, but it never worked. The only time she had done something magical was when she accidentally set off her grandmother's storybook that transported her and Conner into the Land of Stories. But since it was her *grandmother's book*, she wondered if she was capable of doing anything alone.

Sometimes, when Alex was feeling particularly desperate, she would go into the school library and find a random fairy-tale treasury. She would hold it against her chest and think of how much she wanted to see the fairy-tale world, just like she did the night of her twelfth birthday. But it never did anything but attract unwanted attention from other students.

"Why is she hugging a book?" a popular girl said to her snooty pack on one occasion.

"Maybe she's taking it to homecoming!" another girl said, and they all laughed at Alex's expense.

Alex was tempted to yell, "Hey! My grandmother is Cinderella's fairy godmother, and as soon as she teaches me magic I'm gonna turn you into the lip gloss you wear too much of!" But she kept these thoughts to herself.

As Alex rode her bike the rest of the way home from the train station, she closed her eyes for a minute and pretended she was riding along Thumbelina Stream in the Fairy Kingdom—a herd of unicorns was to her left and a hovering flock of fairies was to her right—and she was meeting her grandmother for a magic lesson on how to transform rags into a beautiful ball gown.

Paradise, she thought to herself.

Alex opened her eyes a second before crashing hard into a set of trash cans. Thankfully, the only witness was a garden gnome across the street, but even it seemed to judge her.

She got up and brushed herself off, deciding to walk her bike the rest of the way home. It had been a brutal reality check.

The Baileys still lived in the same rental house with a flat roof and few windows, but things were looking up for them. Their mother had finally caught up on a lot of their financial troubles and wasn't working nearly as much as she used to. However, something else had been occupying Charlotte Bailey's time recently, and it wasn't nursing.

Alex parked her bike on the porch. The front door flew open just as Alex was about to walk through it. Conner was standing on the other side. He seemed upset and very concerned about something.

“What’s your problem?” Alex asked.

“Sorry, I thought you were Mom,” Conner said.

“Do you need her for something?” Alex said.

“No,” Conner said. “Mom is just usually home by six o’clock every night.”

“It’s six o’clock right now,” Alex said, looking at him like he was a crazy person.

“It’s six-*fifteen*, Alex,” Conner said, raising his eyebrows.

“So?”

“Well, where is she, then? Do you see her? Is there a car parked in the driveway?” Conner asked.

“Maybe there’s traffic,” Alex said.

“Or something *else*,” he said. “Like something *keeping* her at work.”

“Is there a point to all of this?” Alex asked, becoming annoyed.

“I need to show you something,” Conner finally admitted. “But let me warn you, you aren’t going to like it.”

“Um… okay,” Alex said and followed her brother in.

A series of barks and whimpers came from inside the house as Alex stepped through the front door.

“*Buster!* Down, boy! It’s just Alex!” Conner shouted. “Why does this stupid dog act like everyone who comes inside this house is carrying explosives? We live here, too!”

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on, Conner?” Alex asked, running out of patience.

“I’ll show you. It’s in the kitchen,” he said. “There’s been a *development*.”

CHAPTER TWO

IT STARTED WITH A DOG

Afew months ago, Buster the Border collie was rescued from the local animal shelter and given to the Bailey family. He was a gift from Dr. Robert Gordon, whom Charlotte worked with at the hospital and who had become a close family friend.

“Dr. Bob,” as the twins called him when he occasionally came over for dinner, was a kind man whose face settled into a natural smile. He was balding and not very tall but had big, caring eyes that made him an instant friend to anyone he met.

“Oh, Bob! You shouldn’t have!” Charlotte said as soon as he surprised them with the canine.

“What’s up with the pooch?” Conner said when he came to see what the ruckus was about.

“He’s all yours!” Bob said. “Your mom is always talking about the Border collie she had when she was a little girl and said she’s always secretly wanted another one. I was volunteering at the animal shelter and as soon as I saw him I knew I had to adopt him for you guys.”

“We have a dog?!” Conner exclaimed. Although the words came out of his mouth, he hadn’t fully grasped the reality of it.

“I suppose we do,” Charlotte said.

Conner immediately fell to the floor and started rolling around with his new pet. *“We have a dog! We have a dog!”* he exclaimed. “Finally, our suburban lives are complete! Thank you, Dr. Bob!”

“You’re very welcome!” Bob said.

“What’s your name, boy?” Conner asked.

“Buster,” Bob told him. “At least, that’s what they called him at the shelter.”

The black-and-white dog was obnoxiously happy and had bright green eyes, one of which was larger than the other. Bob had placed a red bandana around Buster’s collar.

Conner hugged him and almost cried tears of joy. “I know we’ve just met, Buster, but I feel like I’ve loved you my entire life!” he said.

“Who’s this?” Alex asked when she came to see what was causing all the excitement.

“This is my dog, Buster!” Conner said. He took off one of his socks and he and Buster played tug-of-war with it.

“He’s for *all* of you,” Bob corrected him.

“Conner, don’t use good socks!” Charlotte said.

Alex unintentionally let out a high-pitched squeal and her mouth dropped open. “We have a dog?!” she asked and jumped up and down. Something about Buster made the twins act like they were ten again.

“Yes, we have a dog,” Charlotte said, and shared her smile.

“Don’t be disappointed if he likes me more, Alex,” Conner said matter-of-factly. “Dogs tend to bond with boys more. It’s proven science, I think.”

“Buster, come here!” Alex called. Buster ran straight to Alex’s side and happily whimpered up at her.

“Never mind,” Conner said, a little disappointed.

The twins were so excited to get a dog they never questioned the gift for a second. They were so distracted playing with the new addition to their family that they didn’t see Charlotte give Bob a long, thankful hug, an embrace that lasted too long to just be a *friendly* gesture.

But as time went on, and the twins saw more of Bob, they were forced to notice the signs that their mother and the doctor were more than just friends.…

Conner sat Alex down at the kitchen table as soon as she walked through the door. Although he saw them every day, Buster couldn’t contain his excitement for the twins both being home. He jumped up and down and spun in circles around the kitchen.

“Buster, calm down!” Conner ordered. “I swear, that dog needs to be on medication.”

“What’s going on, Conner?” Alex asked. “You love that dog as much as he loves you.”

“That was before I discovered Buster was a *bribe*!” Conner animatedly declared. “Take a look at this!”

Conner retrieved a beautiful bouquet of a dozen long-stemmed red roses from the kitchen counter. He placed them on the table directly in front of Alex.

“Those are beautiful! Where are they from?” Alex asked.

“They were delivered when I got home from school,” Conner said. “They’re for Mom… from *Bob*!”

Alex’s eyes widened. “Oh dear,” she said and gulped. “Well, that’s very *sweet* of him.”

“Sweet?!” Conner said loudly. “This isn’t sweet, Alex! It’s downright *romantic*!”

“Conner, you don’t know he meant it in that way,” Alex said. “People send other people flowers all the time.”

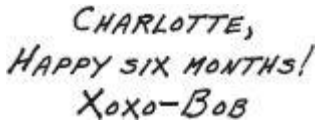
Conner searched through the bouquet. “Daisies are friendly, sunflowers are friendly, a Venus flytrap is friendly—but *red roses mean romance*!” he said. “And he sent a card. It’s in here somewhere—I read it like a hundred times before I threw it back in—here it is. Read it.”

He passed a small card to his sister, and to her horror it was heart-shaped. She looked down at it like it had the results to an exam she knew she had flunked.

“I don’t want to read it,” Alex said. “I don’t want to invade Mom’s privacy.”

“Then I’ll read it to you,” Conner said and tried snatching the card out of her hands.

“Fine, I’ll read it!” Alex said and reluctantly opened the card.



Alex quickly closed the card as if trying to stop the truth from escaping it. Conner leaned close to his sister and studied her face, waiting for a reaction to surface.

“Weeeeeell?” Conner said.

“Well,” Alex said as she ran through a dozen unlikely theories, “we don’t know that this means they’re in a *relationship*.”

Conner threw his hands into the air and paced around the kitchen. “Alex, don’t do that!” he said, pointing his finger at her.

“Don’t do what?” she asked.

“That thing you do when you try to ignore a situation by making light of it!” he said.

“Conner, I think you’re overreacting—”

“Face it, Alex, we were blinded by a Border collie!” Conner exclaimed loud enough for the neighbors to hear him. “Mom has a *boyfriend*!”

Hearing *Mom* and *boyfriend* made Alex squirm. In her opinion, the two words didn’t belong in the same dictionary, let alone the same sentence.

“I’m not going to get too worked up about something until I hear it from Mom herself,” Alex said.

“What more proof do you need?” Conner said. “Mom got a dozen red roses delivered with a heart-shaped card specifying an amount of time! What do you think ‘six months’ means? Do you think Mom and Bob joined a bowling league and didn’t tell us?”

Both of their heads abruptly turned in the same direction when they heard the garage door open. Charlotte was finally home from work.

“Ask her,” Alex mouthed at her brother.

“*You* ask her,” Conner mouthed back at her.

Charlotte stepped inside a few moments later. She was still dressed in her blue scrubs from the hospital and carried a bag of groceries. She walked right by the flowers on the table without noticing them.

“Hey, guys, sorry I’m late,” Charlotte said. “I stopped by the store on the way home to pick up something for dinner. I’m starving! I was thinking of making a chicken-and-rice something or other; sound good? Are you two hungry?”

Charlotte looked up when the twins stayed silent.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Are you okay—*wait*, where did those flowers come from?”

“They’re from your *boyfriend*,” Conner said.

In the thirteen years of being her children, Alex and Conner could count on one hand how many times they had seen their mother become speechless. This was one of those times.

“Oh…” Charlotte looked like a deer in headlights.

“You have a lot of explaining to do!” Conner said and crossed his arms. “You should probably have a seat.”

“I’m sorry, did someone promote you to parent?” Charlotte said and glared at her son.

“Sorry,” Conner said and lowered his head. “I just think we need to talk about this.”

“Is it true?” Alex asked with a half-concerned, half-horrified expression.

“Yes,” Charlotte said with difficulty. “Bob and I have been seeing each other.”

Conner slid into a seat next to his sister. Alex’s forehead hit the table.

“I was going to tell you,” Charlotte said. “I was just waiting—”

“Let me guess, until we were older?” Conner asked. “If only I had a nickel for every time we heard that. Alex, watch out—we may be two-thirds of a set of triplets but won’t know until we’re thirty.”

Charlotte closed her eyes tightly and let out a deep breath. “Actually, I was waiting until I could figure out *how* to tell you,” she said softly. “You guys have been so worried about not seeing your grandmother. I didn’t want to add anything to your plate.”

She took a seat and let the news sink in for a moment.

“I know this is hard to swallow,” Charlotte said.

“Hard to swallow? We need an emotional Heimlich, Mom,” Conner said.

“I actually think finding out our grandmother is a fairy in another dimension was easier to process than this is,” Alex added.

Charlotte’s eyes fell sadly to her hands. The twins didn’t mean to make her feel bad, but they were feeling so many things, they were forgetting to be considerate.

“Bob and I have known each other for a very long time,” Charlotte said. “When your dad died, he became a very good friend. He was one of the few people I could talk to about everything that I was going through. Did you know Bob’s wife died just a year before your dad?”

Both of the twins shook their heads.

“You could have talked to *us*,” Conner said.

“No, I couldn’t,” Charlotte said. “I needed another adult to confide in. You’ll understand one day when you have kids. Bob and I each knew what the other was going through. We talked every day at work and became very close, and recently, that friendship has grown.”

The twins couldn’t decide if what she was saying was helping or making it all worse. The more she explained, the more real it became.

“What about Dad?” Alex said. “Your and Dad’s story was literally a fairy tale, Mom. He traveled from a different world to be with you. Don’t you still love *him*?”

The question was heartbreaking for all of them, especially Charlotte.

“Your father was the love of my life, and always will be,” Charlotte said. “And these years without him have been the hardest of my entire life. We were married for twelve years, and in that time we talked about a lot of things, a lot of *possibilities*. I know for a fact that if I spent another year missing your father, he would be so disappointed in me. He would want me to move on as much as I would want him to move on if the roles were reversed. It was a promise we made to each other.”

Charlotte went silent for a moment before continuing. “The first year after he died, I thought I never would be able to move on,” she said. “I thought part of me died with him and I would never be able to love anyone again. But then Bob told me he and his wife had made the same promises to each other just before she passed away, and he felt the same way. For some reason, just knowing someone else was in the same boat as me made everything feel so much better.”

The twins shared a hopeless glance, knowing there was nothing they could do to ease their mother’s heartache. “I know this is difficult for you two,” Charlotte said. “I’m not saying you need to be okay with it. You can feel however you want, and rightfully so. Just know that Bob makes me really happy, and it’s been a long time since I’ve felt this way.”

Conner unsuccessfully tried keeping a question that popped up in his mind to himself.

“Conner, what’s your question?” Charlotte asked and dabbed the corners of her eyes with the edge of her sleeve.

“I don’t have a question,” Conner said and shook his head unconvincingly.

“Yes you do,” Charlotte said, knowing her son better than he knew himself. “You always purse your lips like that when you have something to ask.”

Conner immediately repositioned his mouth.

“It’s okay, honey, you can ask anything,” she said.

“It’s really childish and lame,” Conner warned. “I guess it’s something I’ve always wondered about people who lose their husbands or wives. But one day, if we’re all in… well, *heaven*, I guess, isn’t it going to be a little awkward with Bob and Dad there?”

Alex was about to let out a disapproving sigh but held it in. Even she had to admit it was a decent question. Although she felt horrible for feeling it, a part of her felt like her mom was being unfaithful to her dad.

A smile came to Charlotte’s face and she let out a soft laugh. “Oh, honey, if there’s ever a time or a place when we’re all together again, I imagine we’d be too happy to let things be awkward.”

Alex and Conner looked at each other and knew they were both thinking the same thing. The thought of their family being together again made them both smile.

Charlotte placed her hands on the tops of theirs on the table. “Nothing any of us do will ever bring your dad back,” she said. “And nothing we do will ever push him further away, either. He’ll always be with us in our hearts, no matter what.”

“I guess putting it that way makes me feel better,” Conner said.

“Me too,” Alex said.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Charlotte said and smiled at them. She got up from the table and grabbed her car keys. “I don’t feel like cooking anymore. Let’s go get pizza instead. It’s good to eat something heavy after a heavy conversation.”

CHAPTER THREE

LUNCH IN THE LIBRARY

The next day at school Alex was still having a hard time digesting the conversation (and the pizza) from the night before. The news of her mother's new relationship was a heavy thing to process and did nothing to help the gloomy state she was already in.

She felt like she was slowly losing control over everything in her life, and she hated it.

Alex desperately needed someone to talk to, someone who wasn't her mom or her brother, but an outside source who could hug her and tell her everything was going to be all right—she needed her *grandmother*. She would have given anything just to see her face again. However, since that was impossible at the moment, Alex settled on seeing a *form* of her grandmother instead.

At lunch she went to one of her favorite places in her world: the school library.

"Hi, Alex," the librarian said as Alex passed her desk. "You'll be happy to know I just ordered a new set of encyclopedias!"

"Really?" Alex said. "That's wonderful!"

She smiled for the first time all day. It faded a second later after she realized "new encyclopedias" was the most exciting news she had had in weeks.

"Thank you for your enthusiasm," the librarian said. "Earlier today I told another student I was getting new encyclopedias—he asked me how long I'd be in the hospital! Can you believe that? Times are definitely changing."

"They sure are," Alex said under her breath.

Alex went to the very last aisle of books, where the children's literature was kept. Students weren't allowed to check out these books, as they were mostly used as reference for the English classes. From the top shelf, Alex pulled down an old book that was several hundred pages thick. It was exactly where she had left it on her last visit to the library.

A Treasury of Classic Fairy Tales was written across its brown cover. It wasn't much to look at and didn't have nearly as much majestic charm as

her grandmother's *Land of Stories* book, but it had become Alex's favorite book to visit in the library.

She looked around to make sure no one was watching her. Besides the librarian, who was busy at her computer, she had the library to herself.

Alex opened the book and flipped through the pages. She skimmed through the illustrations of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, of Rapunzel and Red Riding Hood, and of Goldilocks and Jack and the beanstalk. Surprisingly, they were accurate depictions of the people she had met a year ago in the fairy-tale world.

Alex finally found "Cinderella" and came across the picture she wanted to see most: an illustration of the Fairy Godmother.

Alex couldn't help but chuckle under her breath every time she saw it. The artist's version of the Fairy Godmother couldn't have been further from what her grandmother looked like. In this book, she was a tall and voluptuous woman with big lips, wings, long blonde hair, and a large golden crown.

However inaccurate it was, it was technically still her grandmother, and that was all Alex needed to see.

"Hi, Grandma," Alex said quietly to the book. "You look great. I like your crown and your wings. It's funny how different you look in every book I read. Are they just dramatic interpretations, or has your style changed over the years?"

The Fairy Godmother was just a young fairy living in the fairy-tale world when she discovered there was another world. She was the first and only person in the history of both worlds capable of traveling between the two at will. She never understood why she was given such a gift, but magic had always had a mind of its own.

The world was in a very dark place during her first visits. It was the beginning of the Middle Ages, and war and plague were everywhere she looked. The Fairy Godmother told stories of her world to the children she met to brighten their spirits. The tales gave them such hope and joy that she decided to make it her life's work to spread the history of her world in theirs.

The Fairy Godmother eventually enlisted other fairies, including Mother Goose and members of the Fairy Council, to travel secretly with her and help spread the stories (hence the name "fairy tales"), giving a bit of

magic to a world that had little of its own. Over time, the fairies recruited other people, such as the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, to help keep their stories alive.

The two dimensions operated on different time schedules; the fairy-tale world moved at a much slower pace compared to the other world. The fairies tried to visit the other world as much as possible, but though only months would pass between visits in the fairy-tale world, decades would have passed in the other world. It wasn't until Alex and Conner, the first children belonging to both worlds, were born that the dimensions began moving at the same pace.

Alex and Conner were the links that held the two worlds together. And as Alex held the *Treasury of Classic Fairy Tales* in her hands, she could almost feel that power running through her veins. It was no wonder they had loved fairy tales their whole lives.

Alex wondered if her grandmother had devoted the last year solely to spreading fairy tales around the world. Or had something bad happened in the fairy-tale world?

"Grandma, I don't know what's going on, but I could really use you right now," Alex said to the book. "Everything is changing; everything is moving in directions I don't like. This whole growing-up thing is a lot harder than I ever thought it would be. And not getting to see you makes it unbearable."

Alex took another look around the library to make sure she was still alone. She hugged the book as tightly as she could without damaging it and whispered into the top of its spine.

"Please let me come back to the Land of Stories," she said. *"Let me join you and the other fairies. If something has happened, let me help you. I know I can. Please just send me a sign, let me know that you're okay."*

Alex held the book for a few moments more, hoping that maybe today would be the day she would be magically transported back into the world she loved so much. But to her disappointment, she stayed put in the library.

Her whispers didn't go entirely unnoticed, however.

"If hugging that one doesn't work, try one of these," said a voice from nearby.

Startled, Alex dropped the treasury. Down the aisle, seated on the floor with a few stacks of books piled around him, was Conner. Alex had

completely missed him.

“You scared me,” Alex said. She was embarrassed, not knowing what he had and hadn’t heard her saying to the inanimate object.

“You’re lucky I know you; otherwise I probably would have reported you to the school psychologist,” Conner said with a mocking but loving smirk.

“What are you doing here?” Alex asked him. She walked down the aisle closer to her brother and saw that the majority of the books around him were also different storybooks and fairy tales.

“Same thing as you, apparently,” Conner said and then snickered to himself. “Although I didn’t try getting to first base with any of them or anything.”

“Very funny,” Alex said and took a seat next to him. “Is this your first time ever being in the library?”

Conner sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve been in a bit of a funk today. I thought if I came in here and flipped through a couple of these I would feel better,” he explained.

“Did it work?” Alex asked.

“For the most part, I’d say,” Conner said. “Why do you think that is?”

“Well,” Alex said, straightening her headband, “I read in a zoology book once that certain species of birds and insects that live in trees will climb down and hide in the roots if they ever feel like their home is being threatened.”

Conner looked at her like she was speaking in tongues. “And *how* is that relevant to this topic?”

“Because,” Alex explained, “our home is being threatened; things are changing. So here we are, in a library, reading old fairy tales. We returned to *our* roots.”

“Sure,” Conner said, only half understanding her comparison. “How can you remember *that* but you can never remember the names of singers on the radio?”

“My point is,” Alex continued, “sometimes all we need to see are a few familiar faces to make us feel comfortable again.”

Conner nodded. “Well, I wouldn’t say I saw any *familiar* faces,” he said.

He searched through his pile of books and pulled out a couple to show her.

“In *this*, the Egyptian version of ‘Cinderella,’ Grandma is a *hawk*!” he told her excitedly. “And in *this* one, Grandma’s not even in it. Cinderella gets her gown and shoes from a tree! Can you believe that? Like a *tree* could give her a new dress. *Please*. A complete stranger with a wand is much more believable.”

“We should write letters of complaint,” Alex said. “Should we sign it as the grandchildren of the Fairy Godmother? Do you think they’ll take it more seriously if we do?” They both laughed.

“Definitely!” Conner said. “Or personal acquaintances of the long-lost Charming prince! I bet no one has ever heard that one before.”

Both the twins went silent for a moment and their amusement faded into despair. “I miss Froggy,” Conner said. “I miss *saying* ‘Froggy.’ ”

“There’s not much we can do about it,” Alex said. “If Grandma wanted us to come back, she would tell us what was going on. Until then, I guess we’ll have to keep hugging books.”

“Great,” Conner said sarcastically. “I wonder what Dad would tell us if he were alive. I don’t think there’s a story even in *his* catalog that could help us get through everything we’re going through now.”

Alex had to think about it. Most of her dad’s stories had been perfect for their elementary-school dilemmas, but what advice would he give them now?

“I bet he would say that anyone can have a once-upon-a-time or a happily-ever-after, but it’s the journey between that makes the story worth telling,” Alex said. “And how characters face the challenges at hand is what makes them heroes.”

“Yeah…” Conner said. “Something like that.… You’re good at this.”

A high-pitched beep sounded as an announcement was made over the loudspeaker.

“Conner Bailey, please report to the principal’s office. Conner Bailey, please report to the principal’s office.”

Both of the twins looked up toward the speaker and then at each other.

“What did you do?” Alex asked.

“I don’t know,” Conner said with a gulp. He mentally rewound through the past four weeks of his life, thinking of anything he had done

that could warrant a trip to the principal's office, but found nothing. "At least, I don't *think* I did anything."

Conner collected his things and put the library books back on the shelves.

"Well, wish me luck," he said to his sister. "See you after school… *I hope*."

Alex stayed seated on the floor, discouraging thoughts filling her head. What would happen if she never saw her grandmother again? Would she become a weird, book-hugging lady who traveled from one library to the next? Would her future children believe her when she told them about her connections to the fairy-tale world?

The bell eventually rang and Alex got to her feet. She picked up the *Treasury of Classic Fairy Tales* from where she had dropped it on the floor and decided to take one last look at the illustration before heading to class.

Alex turned to the same page she had been talking to before, and to her amazement, the illustration was completely different. Instead of the voluptuous woman with the wings and crown, the picture showed a petite woman with a kind smile in a sky-blue sparkly robe. *It was her grandmother.*

Alex looked around the library in shock as a smile grew on her face. Her grandmother had just sent her a postcard.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

Conner had only been sitting outside the principal's office for ten minutes, but it felt like two hours. The mystery of why he was there was picking at his psyche like a pair of hungry buzzards.

He had been a surprisingly good student this year—not as great as his sister, perhaps, but good nevertheless. Conner's grades were decent, although he probably could have done better in science and math, as he imagined most students could. Besides occasionally forgetting which revolution happened where, he was doing fairly well in his history class, too. And for the first time in his life, he was actually enjoying assignments in his English class.

He was confident he hadn't done anything wrong. So why was he there? He grew paranoid someone had possibly framed him. Was he being held responsible for the graffiti on the lockers or the goldfish put in the faculty toilets? Sure, Conner thought those pranks were hilarious, but he hadn't *done* them. If they didn't think he was guilty, did they think he knew who was and want him to testify? Could he plead the Fifth in school? Did he have the right to a lawyer or a phone call?

The door to the principal's office opened and a girl ran out in tears. Conner instantly tensed.

"Mr. Bailey?" Mrs. Peters called from inside her office.

Conner gulped. Hearing her call out his name was just as terrifying today as it had been when she taught him in the sixth grade.…

A huge promotion was the last thing she had expected, but Mrs. Peters had recently come up in the world.

After twenty-five long years of teaching, Mrs. Peters had made the tough decision to retire. The subject had been on the veteran educator's mind for quite some time. Unbeknownst to her students, Mrs. Peters kept a calendar at her desk for years and marked down the days until she was eligible.

She often daydreamed about her life after teaching. She planned all the exotic vacations she wanted to take. She made a list of all the small fixes around her condo she'd finally have the time to make. She assembled

everything she needed to start a vegetable garden in her small yard. In other words, she was more than ready.

But in the final weeks leading up to the conclusion of her teaching career, Mrs. Peters received the offer to become a *principal*. As appealing as a life of gardening and relaxation was, a life as principal gave her the essence of what she loved the most about being a teacher: *authority over impressionable youngsters*.

Needless to say, she didn't hesitate to take the job. She thrived in the powerful position of administering punishment, and occasionally something would come up that allowed her to do what she loved more than anything, which was why she called Conner Bailey into her office.

"Have a seat," Mrs. Peters ordered.

Conner sat across from her so obediently he reminded himself of Buster, but didn't expect to be rewarded with a biscuit. His eyes wandered around the room; he noticed Mrs. Peters decorated her office in the same patterns and floral prints as the dresses she wore.

"Do you know why I've called you in here today?" Mrs. Peters asked. She wasn't even looking at him. Her eyes were busy scanning through a stack of papers in her hands.

"Not a clue," Conner said. He could almost see what the papers were in the reflection of her glasses.

"I wanted to talk to you about the writing you've been doing in your English class," she said, finally making eye contact.

Conner realized the papers she was going through were in his handwriting. He panicked.

"Is this about my essay on *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" he asked. "I know I wrote, 'One of the saddest parts about this book is that a girl is named Scout,' but I talked to Ms. York about my approach and understand why it could have been better."

Mrs. Peters's eyes squinted and her brow flexed in a judgmental manner; this was bound to happen at least once when she was in the same room as Conner.

"Or maybe this is about my report on *Animal Farm*?" Conner said. "I know I said, 'I wish George Orwell had used something to represent politics that didn't give me a major craving for a bacon cheeseburger,' but that's really how I felt; I wasn't trying to be funny."

“No, Mr. Bailey,” Mrs. Peters said. “I called you to my office to talk about the *creative writing* you’ve been working on in Ms. York’s class.”

“Oh?” Conner asked. Creative writing was actually his favorite part of the class. “How am I screwing *that* up?”

“You’re not,” Mrs. Peters said. “It’s *fantastic*.”

Conner’s head jerked in disbelief.

“Did you just say what I think you just said?” Conner asked.

“I believe so,” Mrs. Peters said, almost as surprised as he was. “Ms. York was afraid your stories might have been plagiarized, so she sent them to me to look over, but they’re unlike anything I’ve ever read. I assured her they appeared very original to me.”

Conner was having difficulty processing it all; Mrs. Peters of all people was complimenting *and* defending him.

“So I’m in here for a *good thing*?” Conner asked.

“A very good thing,” Mrs. Peters said. “Your stories and perspectives on fairy-tale characters are wonderful! I loved your stories about the Charming Dynasty searching for the long-lost Charming brother and the Evil Queen’s long-lost lover being trapped in her Magic Mirror. And Trix the misbehaving fairy and Trollbella the homely troll princess are such imaginative new characters. It’s very impressive!”

“Thank you?” Conner said.

“Can I ask you what inspired these stories?” Mrs. Peters said.

Conner gulped. He didn’t know how to answer. Technically he had used the class to write about *his experiences*, so the stories weren’t necessarily “creative writing.” Was it considered lying even if he *couldn’t* tell the truth?

“They just came to me,” Conner said with a shrug. “I can’t really explain it.”

Mrs. Peters did something Conner had never seen her do before: *She smiled at him.*

“I was hoping you would say that,” Mrs. Peters said. She retrieved a folder from the inside of her desk. “I took the liberty of looking at the student profile you filled out at the beginning of the school year. I found it interesting that under ‘future career aspirations,’ you simply wrote ‘something cool.’ ”

Conner nodded. “I stand by that,” he said.

“Well, unless you have the goal of becoming a professional snowman, is it safe to presume you’re open to suggestions?” Mrs. Peters asked.

“Sure,” Conner said. He still hadn’t thought of any jobs that fit the description.

“Mr. Bailey, have you ever considered becoming a *writer*?” Mrs. Peters said. “If these stories are any indication, with time and practice, I think you may have what it takes.”

Although they were the only people in the room, Conner had to remind himself she was talking to him.

“A writer?” Conner asked. *“Me?”* The thought had never crossed his mind. His head instantly filled with doubts regarding the prospect, like white blood cells attacking a virus.

“Yes, *you*,” Mrs. Peters said and pointed at him for further distinction.

“But aren’t writers supposed to be super smart?” Conner asked. “Don’t they say things like, *‘I concur’* and *‘I don’t identify with the likes of this’*? Those kinds of people are writers, not me. They’d laugh at me if I tried being one of them.”

Mrs. Peters exhaled a small gust of air through her nose, which Conner remembered was her version of a laugh.

“Intelligence is not a competition,” she said. “There is plenty to go around, and there are many ways it can be demonstrated.”

“But anyone can write, right?” Conner asked. “I mean, that’s why authors get judged so harshly, isn’t it? Because technically everyone could do it if they wanted to.”

“Just because anyone can do something doesn’t mean everyone should,” Mrs. Peters said. “Besides, anyone with an Internet connection feels they have the credentials to critique or belittle anything these days.”

“I suppose,” Conner said, but his defeated look said otherwise. “What makes you think I’ll be a good writer? My stories are so simple compared to other ones out there. And I don’t have a very good vocabulary—and I’m worthless without spell-check.”

Mrs. Peters took off her glasses and massaged her eyes. Conner was still a challenging student to get through to.

“Having something worth telling and a passion to tell it are what make you a good writer,” Mrs. Peters said. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve read novels or articles that used complicated words and witty wordplay to

cover up the fact that they had absolutely no story to tell. A good story should be enjoyed; sometimes simplicity can go a long way."

Conner still wasn't sold on the idea. "I just don't know if it's for me."

"You don't have to decide right now," Mrs. Peters said. "I'm only asking you to think about it. I would hate it if somebody with your imagination graduated and didn't do 'something cool' with it."

She locked eyes with him and another rare, small smile appeared on her face.

"I have two loves in my career: reprimanding and encouraging," Mrs. Peters went on. "Thank you for letting me encourage today. I don't get many opportunities."

"No problem," Conner said. "It's nice to be in the other category for a change."

Mrs. Peters put her glasses back on and handed Conner his stack of papers. He figured their meeting was over now and headed to the door, relieved not to be in tears like his principal's prior guest.

"I am so proud of you, Conner," Mrs. Peters said just as he reached for the door handle. "You've come a long way from napping in my class."

All Conner could do was smirk sweetly at her. If you had told him a year and a half ago that one day Mrs. Peters would become one of his greatest supporters (or refer to him by his first name), he would have never believed it.

Conner mulled things over as he walked home. His thoughts soared into the realm of possibilities and sank into the realm of uncertainty. Had Mrs. Peters gone mad or was he, *Conner Bailey*, actually capable of becoming a writer one day? Could he actually make a career out of writing about the experiences he and his sister had had in the fairy-tale world?

Would anyone want to read his stories about Trollbella and Trix, or the Evil Queen and the Big Bad Wolf Pack, or Jack and Goldilocks? Would *those people* mind if he wrote about them? If he ever saw her again, would Goldilocks beat the living daylights out of him for writing about the love triangle between her, Jack, and Red Riding Hood?

Conner figured people had been writing the same stories about them for centuries; surely they wouldn't mind if he gave the world little updates here and there.

But what about Alex? She had as much ownership over their experiences as he did; would it bother her if he started sharing them with the world?

Alex had always been the one with a future, not him. Planning had always been *her* specialty; Conner always expected she would grow up to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or president. Unfortunately, he hadn't given his own future very much thought, so any prospect seemed like a stretch.

Conner realized he wanted to get Alex's input on all of this. But as he reached their house, he came to a halt. There was something there he didn't expect to see.

"What's Bob doing here?" Conner asked himself, recognizing the car parked outside their home.

The front door flew open before Conner could open it himself. Alex was standing on the other side, wide-eyed and white-faced.

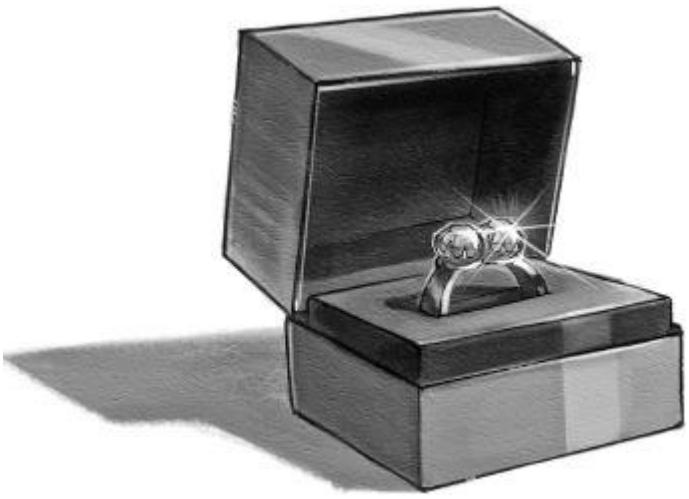
"Finally!" she said in relief.

"What's going on?" Conner asked. "Why is Bob here?"

"He wanted to talk to us before Mom got home," Alex said. "He knows that we know and said he wanted to ask us something. I'm pretty sure I know what it is."

"What?" Conner asked, completely oblivious.

"Just get inside," Alex told him. "I think there's about to be a *major* development."



CHAPTER FIVE

THE PROPOSAL

Alex and Conner hadn't looked like identical twins since they were four years old. It was around that age when Charlotte stopped dressing them in the same outfits every day and they started growing into their own unique features. But as they sat on the couch both staring daggers at Bob with their arms crossed, it was once again hard to tell them apart.

"So…" Bob said and shifted uncomfortably in a chair across from them. "Your mom said she finally spilled the beans about us."

It was brave of him to take the situation by the horns.

"She sure did," Conner said.

Bob nodded pleasantly, like it was good news. The twins didn't even blink—they were an intimidating pair.

"I apologize that those flowers came to the house. They were supposed to have gone to the hospital," Bob said.

"Yes, they should have," Alex said. Bob had done thousands of difficult surgeries over the course of his career, but he found being stared down by the children of the woman he was dating to be the most stressful experience of his life.

"I understand why this is difficult information to process," Bob said. "But it's still *me*, guys. I'm still the same Dr. Bob who you've had dinner with a dozen times. I'm the same guy who takes you to see the movies your mom doesn't want to see. I'm still the same guy who brought you Buster. I just happen to be—"

"Dating our mother?" Conner asked. "Nice try, but everything you listed makes the situation worse. We *thought* we knew you."

"Are you admitting that Buster was some sort of dowry, Bob?" Alex asked.

"Alex, what's a dowry?" Conner said out of the side of his mouth, not breaking his stare at Bob.

"It's a settlement of sorts," Alex said. "Like, in ancient times, a man would be promised a dozen camels or something in exchange for his daughter's hand in marriage."

“Gotcha,” Conner said, diverting his full attention back to Bob. “You don’t think our mother is worth a dozen camels, Bob? One dog and you think the deal is sealed?”

“I definitely don’t think the deal is sealed,” Bob said. “Yet.”

Alex and Conner narrowed their eyes in perfect unison. Bob reached inside his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. The twins wondered what it was for a second, but only a second. Once they realized it was too small to hold anything but a *ring*, it dawned on them what it meant.

“Oh my God,” Alex said.

“No way,” Conner said.

Bob looked down at the box with a smile. “You know, when my wife died four years ago, I never thought I would be happy again,” he said. “I save lives every day, but for a long time I thought it would be impossible to save mine. And then along came your mom, and I learned I had been wrong.”

Alex and Conner looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes. They had never seen Bob get so sappy, but still they appreciated how honest he was being with them.

“I know you’ve been seeing each other for a while, but this all seems so sudden,” Alex said.

“We only found out last night,” Conner said. “In our minds you guys have only been dating for one day. Are you sure you aren’t rushing things?”

The way he looked down at the ring, with loving eyes and a heartfelt smile, made it obvious that Bob had never been so sure about something in his life.

“I’ve been around for a while, guys. And I’ve learned that things like this don’t come around very often,” Bob said. “*Not* taking this opportunity to ask your mother to be with me for the rest of my life would make me the biggest fool in the world.”

Bob opened the box and showed the twins the ring. Alex gasped. It was the most beautiful ring they had ever seen. It had a silver band with two large diamonds, one blue and the other pink. They could have sworn they heard music playing while it twinkled in the light, but it was just in their heads.

“It took me a month to find the perfect one,” Bob said. “I knew this was right as soon as I saw it. I thought the diamonds would remind her of

you two; they're different shades of the same cut."

Alex's eyes immediately watered after hearing this. Conner folded his arms a little tighter.

"That's the most touching thing I've ever heard," Alex said between sniffles.

"Stop making me like you again," Conner said, brow furrowed.

Bob sat up straighter, happy their meeting was moving in a better direction. "I'm not trying to replace your dad and I'm not asking to be your new one," he said. "But I *am* asking for your permission to ask your mother to marry me. I don't want to do this without your blessing."

The twins couldn't believe it. They both felt like they were passengers on this ship, and now he was letting them be its captains?

"We need a minute to think it over," Conner answered quickly.

Before Alex knew it, her brother was dragging her into the kitchen. They stood there for a few moments in total silence, just staring at each other.

"What are you thinking?" Alex asked.

"I'm thinking this is uncomfortable," Conner said. "This is more uncomfortable than the time I walked in on you and Mom talking about training bras."

Alex rolled her eyes and peeked into the other room at Bob, making sure he couldn't hear them. "Honestly, Conner, I don't think we have any power over this. It was really nice of Bob to act like we're a part of the decision, but you just heard what he had to say and you heard what Mom said last night. I don't think anything is going to stop them from being together."

Conner sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

"You're right," Conner said. "But who knows if Mom is even going to say yes? Maybe she'll have reservations about it?"

"Reservations about what?" Alex asked. "She loves him and he loves her. What's going to stop her?"

Conner looked away from her, not wanting to say what he was thinking, but they were both thinking it.

"Dad's dead, Conner," Alex said. "He's not coming back no matter how much we want him to."

It was hard for Alex to be so frank. Usually she let the adults in her life dish out the tough love, but since they were slowly disappearing, she had no choice but to serve it up herself.

Conner knew she was speaking to herself as much as she was speaking to him. Alex had a talent for saying everything he didn't want to think.

"I suppose Mom has given us so much over the years, our blessing is the very least we could give her," Conner said.

"Yeah, it is," Alex said and nodded. "This is another big one."

"Another big what?" Conner asked.

"A big moment," Alex said and sighed. "We've had a lot of them."

"Yeah, we have," he said. "You'd think we'd be immune to it by now."

"Immune to *life*?" Alex asked. "Is anyone ever that lucky?"

Conner grunted and put his hands on his hips. "Fine," he said. "He can marry Mom, but I'm still calling him Dr. Bob."

The twins returned to the other room. Bob anxiously stood and faced them.

"Well?" he asked with bated breath.

"The jury has spoken," Conner said. "Alex and I have decided you may ask our mom to marry you."

Bob joyfully clapped his hands together and tears came to his eyes. "Guys, you've made me the happiest man alive!" Bob said. "Thank you! I promise to take care of her for the rest of her life!"

Buster barked and jumped up and down, joining in on the celebration.

"Where are you going to do it?" Alex asked him.

"How about here, over dinner maybe?" Bob said. "I'll order food from her favorite restaurant and surprise her when she gets off work."

"When?" Conner asked.

"The sooner the better," Bob said. "I'm free next Thursday night. How about then?"

"I have class in the afternoon but I'll be home by six," Alex said.

"Great, then it's settled!" Bob said. "I'll propose next week on Thursday night at six o'clock! I'll ask a few of the nurses to keep your mom busy so she doesn't get home early and ruin the surprise. This is going to be terrific!"

The twins were looking forward to it. Not the event itself, but a chance to see their mom happy again.

“Hey, Bob,” Conner said, “are you going to move in with us? Usually married people like to live with each other—for the first couple months at least.”

“That’s a good question,” Alex said. “Where are we going to live?”

“My house?” Bob said and shrugged his shoulders. “Before she died, my wife and I bought a big house not too far from here, thinking we were going to raise a family. It’d be nice to finally fill all those rooms up.”

The twins looked around their small rental house. The thought of leaving it made them feel sad; it had unexpectedly become home over the years.

“It’ll be weird to move again,” Alex said. “But easy since we never actually finished unpacking last time.”

“I’ve got a swimming pool,” Bob said, trying to cheer up the twins.

Conner’s eyes grew big. “Whoa, whoa, whoa,” he said. “Bob, you could have saved yourself an entire afternoon if you had just started with ‘swimming pool.’ ”

Alex rolled her eyes. Bob let out a soft chuckle.

“Now Mom better say yes or *I’m* going to be so disappointed,” Conner said.

It was hard for the twins to focus on anything the following week. The looming Thursday stood out like a bookmarked page in their future. The closer it got, the more anxious they became.

Alex and Conner didn’t know why they were so nervous; after all, *they* weren’t asking anyone to marry them. But in a strange way, Bob was marrying them, too. And as apprehensive about it as they were, the twins started to feel excited about Bob joining their family.

Conner was really looking forward to having another man around the house. As much as he loved his mom and sister, he missed having someone else there who appreciated the comedy in a bodily function.

He wrote a short story in his English class that week about a family of trolls whose mother was engaged to an ogre. It wasn’t the most flattering depiction of any of them, but it was quite therapeutic for him. He drew little

sketches in the margins of his paper; the troll children looked very much like him and his sister. The one based on Alex even had a headband in front of her horns.

Alex found Conner working on the story one afternoon after school. She had never seen him look so devoted to something before.

“What’s this?” Alex asked him.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Conner said, a little embarrassed. He still hadn’t talked to her about his meeting with Mrs. Peters. “It’s just some creative writing for English.”

“That’s nice—*wait*, is that supposed to be me?” Alex said and pointed to his sketch.

“Not at all,” Conner said. “What would make you think that?”

“Because it says ‘supposed to be Alex’ underneath it!” she said, annoyed and offended. “That’s so rude, Conner. How old are you?”

Conner guiltily looked up at his sister. “There’s something I forgot to tell you,” he said. “I’ve sort of been writing about the two of us a lot in my English class.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked.

“About our adventures in the fairy-tale world,” he said. “They’ve made for some great stories—that’s why Mrs. Peters called me into her office the other day. She really liked them and wanted me to consider being a writer. She said I may have what it takes, whatever that is.” He paused. “Thoughts or concerns?”

Alex blinked twice. “I think that’s a wonderful idea!” she said, and Conner sighed with relief. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I was worried you wouldn’t want me spreading our business around,” Conner said. “You’re kind of the co-owner of our experiences.”

“On the contrary,” she said. “I think they *should* be told. We saw so many things and met so many people it would be a waste to keep them to ourselves. Dad would be so proud of you.”

Conner smiled to himself. He hadn’t thought about that.

“Really?” he asked. “You think so?”

“Absolutely,” Alex said. “He’d be so happy the storyteller gene went to one of us. I’ve always tried telling and retelling stories, but you’re so much better at it than me. You’re funny; people like listening to you.”

Conner shrugged. “Aw, shucks,” he said. “But I’m not going to argue.” He pulled out the stack of his stories to share with her. “*This* one is about Trix’s trial and this one is about Trollbella giving freedom in exchange for a kiss—wish I could forget about that. *This* was my first one, about the Curvy Tree, but I was super paranoid people would find out it was true so I changed it to the Curvy Giraffe. It doesn’t make as much sense, but oh well, I’m learning.”

“This is great, Conner,” Alex said. “*Really* great.”

Conner grinned from ear to ear. He believed her much more than he believed Mrs. Peters. Her approval gave him the validation he needed to believe in himself.

Alex flipped through her brother’s stories. She smiled and laughed as she scanned through them, remembering the events they were based on.

“Oh dear,” Alex said, looking up from the papers, a fresh thought behind her eyes. “*Bob.* Are we going to tell him? Are we going to tell him who Grandma and Dad really are?”

Conner couldn’t answer. The thought hadn’t crossed either of their minds until now. How were they going to share their family’s biggest secret with him?

“*Should* we tell him?” Conner asked.

“We probably should in case Grandma ever shows up with an elf or a fairy on our doorstep,” Alex said.

Conner looked off into the distance. “Gosh, *who are we*?” he said. “What other family has a problem like this? Most skeletons in the closet don’t have wings.”

“I imagine he’ll have a lot of questions either way,” Alex said. She let out a long sigh. “But it’s not like it’s really relevant anymore. It may be pointless to tell him we have ties to another dimension if we don’t get to interact with it ever again.”

“Guess we’ll just have to play it by ear,” Conner said. “It may be a good excuse to have in our back pocket for when we get older. We could tell Bob we’re going to the fairy-tale world and then go to a party instead.”

Alex tilted her head and looked at him curiously. “Why would we ever choose a party over the fairy-tale world?”

Conner shook his head. Just for once he wished his sister would think like a normal teenager. “I keep forgetting you’re an eighty-year-old trapped

in a thirteen-year-old body," he said. "Never mind."

The end of the week slowly arrived and the twins woke up to a beautiful Thursday morning. They gave their mom extra-long hugs just before they left the house, causing her to raise a suspicious eyebrow at them as they headed to school. Alex and Conner felt like the day passed by extra slowly. They glanced up at the clock every five minutes only to be disappointed it hadn't changed much. As soon as school ended, Conner ran home and met Bob at the house to help prepare for the night. He cut corners over his neighbors' lawns and was so careless he nearly tripped over a lawn gnome.

Alex was too antsy to enjoy her honors course or be sleepy on the train ride back. She just wanted the night to be perfect for her mom. And from the looks of things when Alex finally got home, it was going to be pretty close.

The kitchen table had been covered with a silk cloth and there were candles placed in the center. A bottle of champagne and a bottle of cider were on the table as well, begging to be opened for a celebration. The whole house smelled delicious, as Bob had picked up food from Charlotte's favorite Italian restaurant.

He was dressed in a nice suit and tie and held the box tightly in his hand, afraid to let it go. Even Conner had dressed up, putting on his best button-down shirt.

Alex tried putting a bow on Buster's collar, but he wouldn't let her. The dog had been acting strange for a couple days. He stayed seated by the front door and growled at it occasionally. The twins figured a new cat must have moved into the neighborhood, or maybe their jitters were rubbing off on him.

But aside from the dog, everything seemed to be going according to plan.

Alex ran up to her bedroom and dressed in a skirt and her nicest headband. She came downstairs at half past six and joined Bob and Conner at the table.

"Mom should be here any minute!" Conner said. "Let's make this proposal quick, Bob, I'm starving!"

"I'll do my best," Bob said. He kept looking down at the ring. As excited as the twins were, they knew it was nothing compared to what Bob

was feeling.

They couldn't wait for her to walk through the door and see them waiting for her. Alex hoped her mom wouldn't cry too much, because then *she* might start crying. Conner hoped Alex wouldn't start crying because then *he* might start crying and there was no dust to blame it on.

Unfortunately, Charlotte was running late, so the three of them were forced to wait. They waited… and waited… and waited some more. More than an hour had passed after the time she was supposed to be home.

"Should we call her?" Conner asked. "Maybe we should give her a *ring* to see where she is? Get it? Get it?"

"No, don't," Alex said. "She can't suspect a thing!"

After another hour the twins' anticipation turned to anxiety. Bob decided to put the food away so it wouldn't go bad.

"I guess Nurse Nancy is being very thorough," Bob chuckled. "She's probably making sure your mom doesn't get here too early."

But the twins weren't laughing. The last time they'd waited this long for a parent, they'd lost one.

"I'm going to give Nancy a call," Bob said after even more time had passed, and he dialed his colleague at the children's hospital. "Hello, Nancy? Hi, it's Bob. I'm here with the kids; has Charlotte left yet?"

Alex and Conner leaned toward him. They could barely make out what Nancy was saying on the other line. From what they could hear, she sounded surprised.

"She left two hours ago?" Bob said into the phone. "Are you sure? We haven't heard anything from her."

Alex and Conner exchanged fearful looks.

"Something's wrong," Alex said. "I can feel it. Something's happened."

"Mom is never late like this," Conner said, shaking his head.

"Okay, thank you, Nancy, I'll try calling her," Bob said and hung up the phone.

He quickly dialed Charlotte's number next. He didn't make eye contact with the twins, not wanting to add to their concern with his. Bob tried calling several times with no luck.

"She's not answering, guys," Bob said. "Do you think she spontaneously decided to run any errands tonight?"

Alex, worried sick, burst into tears. “We need to call the police!” she said.

“The police wouldn’t do anything unless she’s been gone for forty-eight hours,” Bob said. “Let’s not panic just yet.”

Conner jumped up from the table and paced around the room. “There’s got to be something we can do,” he said.

“I’m going to get on my bike and go looking for her,” Alex said.

“I’ll go with you!” Conner announced.

“Nobody’s going anywhere,” Bob said calmly, although the twins knew he was just as stressed out as they were. “We’ve tried calling the hospital and her phone. Let’s wait for a few more minutes in case she tries to call us back.” Alex’s tears began to flow faster the more she worried, and it was impossible not to. The twins feared that history, *their* history, was repeating itself.

Buster suddenly started a barking frenzy. He was staring intently at the front door, jumping up and scratching it, growling as loudly as he possibly could. The twins had never seen him like this before.

“Buster, what is it, boy?” Bob said. “Is someone at the—?”

The doorbell rang. All of them, including the dog, completely froze. It rang twice before any of them moved.

“Who could that be at this hour?” Bob asked and went to answer the door. The twins followed him into the doorway. They almost wished he wouldn’t answer it. Whatever or whoever it was, it was too late to be anything good.

Buster began another barking and jumping fit. “Buster, get down, boy,” Bob told him.

The dog backed away from the door and stood directly in front of the twins, protective of them. He was ready to pounce on something in an instant if he didn’t like the looks of it. Was he sensing something they couldn’t?

Bob looked back at the distressed twins. “It’s going to be all right, kids,” he said calmly. “Whatever happens, just know it’s all going to be okay.”

Bob slowly opened the front door and peeked out onto the porch. It seemed empty.

“Hello?” he said.

Still, there was nothing and nobody to be found.

“Hello?” Bob tried again. “Is anyone out there—?”

“Seize him!”

In a split second, a dozen soldiers dressed in silver armor barged through the door. One slammed Bob hard against the wall. Alex screamed. Conner grabbed her arm and they tried to run to the other side of the house, but the soldiers formed a tight circle around them and Buster.

Their swords were drawn and they held heavy shields with small glass slippers displayed on the outside crest. The twins recognized the soldiers immediately—they were from the Charming Kingdom—but what in the world were they doing here?

“Get your hands off of me this instant!” Bob yelled, struggling under the soldier’s restraint. “Get away from those kids! Who are you people?!”

“We’ve securely surrounded the twins,” the soldier closest to Alex called to the open front door. “Bring in the Fairy Godmother.”

Alex and Conner looked to each other so fast they could have hurt their necks. *“Fairy Godmother?”* they said in unison.

Two other soldiers quickly charged into the house, led by none other than their grandmother.

“Grandma!?” the twins gasped together. They almost didn’t believe their eyes.

She looked exactly the same as she did the last time they saw her. She was dressed in her long sky-blue robe that sparkled like the night sky. Her hair was styled up, with beautiful white flowers in it. She raised her crystal wand authoritatively as she walked into the house; the twins had never seen her look so worried.

“Oh, thank heavens,” Grandma said.

The soldiers parted their circle for her and she threw her arms around Alex and Conner.

“You have no idea how happy I am to see you,” Grandma said, hugging them so tight they felt like they’d pop.

The twins didn’t hug her back. They couldn’t believe they were seeing her in real life. Their heads were spinning with so many questions, but they only managed to spit out the basics.

“Grandma?” Alex said. *“Is it actually you?”*

“Where have you been?” Conner said.

Their grandmother gently placed a hand on each of their faces. “I’m sorry I’ve been gone for so long,” she said sorrowfully. “I promise to explain everything later.”

She took a moment just to look at them through teary eyes. They knew she had missed them as much as they had missed her. “Just look at you two—you’ve both grown a foot since the last time I saw you,” Grandma said.

Just then, a familiar man walked through the front door. He had a distinguished jawline and wore a bright yellow suit. To Bob’s amazement, the man’s shoulders and his hair were actually on fire. The twins recognized him instantly; it was Xanthous, the only male fairy on the Fairy Council.

“I checked around the property,” Xanthous said. “It’s clear.”

“Xanthous?!” Alex said. “What’s he doing here?”

Bob fought restlessly under the soldier pinning him to the wall. *“What is going on?!”* he yelled. *“Who are you people?”*

Grandma raised her wand in his direction. Xanthous pointed a few fingers at him and his whole hand suddenly lit on fire. Both were ready to fight if necessary.

“Do you know this man?” Xanthous asked the twins.

“Yeah, that’s Dr. Bob,” Conner said. “Don’t set him on fire! That’s our mom’s boyfriend!”

“Boyfriend?” Grandma said and lowered her wand. “Well, I must have been gone for longer than I thought!”

“Release him,” Xanthous ordered and lowered his hand. The soldier immediately dropped his hold on Bob.

“This woman is your grandmother?” Bob asked the twins. “Is she a part of the circus or something? What’s with all the tricks and costumes?”

“What on earth is a *circus*?” Xanthous said, unsure whether he should take offense.

Alex and Conner didn’t know where to begin.

“Bob, it’s a long story,” Alex said.

“In a nutshell, our grandmother is Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother from the fairy-tale world,” Conner said. “I know it’s a lot to process, so take your time—but we promise that’s the only baggage our family has got.”

Bob’s eyes grew bigger and he glanced at the soldiers, at their grandma, and at Xanthous.

“Uh-huh,” Bob grunted, not convinced.

Their grandmother looked around the living room, gravely concerned. “Where’s your mother?” she asked.

“We don’t know,” Conner said.

“She was supposed to be home a few hours ago,” Alex said.

“Grandma, what’s wrong?” Conner asked. “Do you know where Mom is?”

Their grandmother didn’t answer, staying deep in thought.

“Grandma, what’s happening?” Alex demanded. “We haven’t seen you in over a year—why have you suddenly shown up out of the blue? You have to tell us what’s going on. Where’s our mom?”

Their grandma looked back and forth between them. “Children, what I’m about to tell you is going to seem very frightening,” she said. “But I need you to be strong and trust that many qualified people are handling the situation.”

The twins nodded impatiently. Any news was better than no news.

“I believe your mother has been kidnapped,” their grandmother informed them.

They were wrong; having *no news* was much better than knowing this.

CHAPTER SIX

POSITIONING THE GNOMES

Alex and Conner stopped breathing. They felt like their hearts had fallen out of their bodies.

"What?" Alex asked.

"Kidnapped?" Conner gasped. "What do you mean, 'kidnapped'?! *By who*?"

Alex covered her mouth in horror. Conner frantically shook his head from side to side, not wanting to believe it.

Who would want to kidnap a nurse who worked at a children's hospital? How much danger was she in? The situation must be bad if soldiers and fairies from another world were standing in their house.

Their grandmother closed her eyes tightly. "I don't have time to explain," she said softly.

Conner turned bright red. "What do you mean you don't have time to explain?!" he shouted. "You give us *that* information and expect us not to have questions?"

Their grandmother looked down at them sternly. "I'm expecting you to trust that I am handling it to the best of my ability," she said.

"We're not children anymore, Grandma! You have to tell us what's going on!" Conner said. He had never had a reason to raise his voice to her before in his life.

"I know that, and that's why I'm being honest with you—you deserve to know the truth. There is much to discuss later, but right now, the less you know, the better. Is that understood?" Grandma said.

They didn't respond, because they *didn't* understand or agree one bit.

Buster barked up at the Fairy Godmother. Oddly, he hadn't been fazed by the newcomers in their home.

"Grandma, please, we need to know what's going on—" Alex managed to say through her tears.

"It'll have to wait. Right now I need to speak with Sir Lampton," Grandma said.

"What does he have to do with anything?" Conner asked, remembering the friendly head of Cinderella's Royal Guard he and his sister had met in

the fairy-tale world.

Grandma bent down and looked into Buster's uneven eyes, and the dog sat straight up. The twins had never seen him look so obedient.

"Sir Lampton, have you seen anything strange or out of the ordinary?" Grandma asked.

Conner glanced over at Alex. Had their grandmother lost her mind? Did she forget dogs couldn't talk in their world? And why on earth was she calling him Sir Lampton?

Buster barked a single bark at her and nodded, as if he had understood perfectly.

"Oh, forgive me," Grandma said apologetically and waved her wand toward the dog. *"Speak."*

A flash of light traveled from the tip of her wand and into the dog's mouth. Buster began barking, but the sound slowly morphed into the sound of coughing—*human coughing.*

"Pardon me," the dog said. "My word, it's been a long time since I've had to pronounce anything."

Both of the twins gasped. They weren't strangers to talking animals, but hearing their own dog suddenly speak left them completely flabbergasted.

"Nothing out of the ordinary at all," the dog said. "Charlotte left for work this morning and hasn't been home since."

"Sir Lampton?" Alex peeped through the hands covering her mouth. *"Is that you?"*

"You're our *dog*?" Conner said.

"Indeed, children," the dog confessed and lowered his head. "I'm sorry I couldn't reveal my identity to you. Your grandmother wanted someone looking after you but thought having a soldier living in your house would cause you to worry, so she turned me into a dog."

Conner turned to his sister, reddening by the second. "We can't even have a *dog* without it being a magical conspiracy!"

"It's been very challenging," Sir Lampton said. "Dog food and cleaning oneself are some things I don't think I will ever get used to. And the urges to taste and smell *absolutely everything* are quite bothersome. But for you two, I would walk to the ends of the earth."

It was a sweet sentiment from their late father's old friend, but the twins didn't have any room for gratitude in their heads.

"Did you know about this, Bob?" Alex asked.

Bob had been so still the twins had almost forgotten he was there. He had turned a pale shade of green and was holding his stomach. It was clear by the horrified look on his face he had nothing to do with it. This was the first talking animal he had ever seen.

"I hope you can forgive me for casting a little spell on you at the shelter, but I had to make sure you chose Sir Lampton to bring home," Grandma said. "I thought you were just a friend of Charlotte's; I had no idea you were so… *involved*."

"I… I… I…" Bob muttered. *"I think I'm going to be sick!"* He ran straight for the bathroom on the other side of the house. Obviously, Bob had reached his surprise limit for the night.

"So this whole time we thought we had a dog when really we had a babysitter?" Alex asked, trying to wrap her head around it.

"A protector, not a babysitter," Grandma said.

"A protector from what?" Conner asked.

Their grandmother and Sir Lampton looked at each other. The twins knew they were set on keeping as much information from them as possible without being dishonest.

"I promise to share with you the appropriate information as I learn it," Grandma said. "It's a concerning time in the fairy-tale world and it's kept me very occupied. The situation recently reached a peak and I was worried it would affect you, so I made the proper arrangements to make sure you were protected. Unfortunately, it seems your mother has fallen victim to it."

"Speaking of precautions, Fairy Godmother," Xanthous interrupted, "we should position the gnomes while the neighborhood is empty."

"Gnomes?" Conner mouthed to Alex.

"Very well," Grandma said and looked to the other guards she had entered the house with. "I'd like you to take the first shift watching the inside of the house. The rest of you, please follow me outside so I may place you."

Grandma and Xanthous quickly led the soldiers outside to the front lawn. The twins followed closely behind them, with Sir Lampton at their feet, and watched from the porch. Even though they knew she was a veteran

leader of the fairy-tale world's Happily Ever After Assembly it was still strange watching their small grandmother give orders to the large soldiers.

"Take your places," Grandma instructed.

The soldiers positioned themselves on the perimeter of the Baileys' front yard. Their house looked like a miniature Buckingham Palace. The Fairy Godmother waved her crystal wand and one by one turned each soldier into a lawn gnome with a bright flash. They all had pointed red hats and white beards.

"They look just like the gnomes in our neighbor's yard," Conner said. "I almost tripped over one today."

"That was a soldier, actually," Sir Lampton said down by his knee. "He's been watching the outside of the house for a couple of months."

"Creepy," Conner said.

"What's going on out here?" said a sweaty and green-faced Bob, stepping out of the house. "Where'd all the soldiers go—and where'd all those gnomes come from?"

"You just answered your own question, I'm afraid," Alex said.

Bob's eyes darted around the front lawn as he understood. The twins felt sorry for him; in less than an hour he had discovered his girlfriend had been kidnapped and had ties to the fairy-tale world. But overall, they thought he was handling it well.

"After the fourth time I vomited, I realized I wasn't dreaming," Bob said. "I have no history of mental illness in my family, so my best self-diagnosis is that *it's just one of those nights.*"

"Don't worry, Bob, the shock wears off eventually," Conner said to him. "I think—Alex and I have only known for a year and we're still waiting."

Grandma walked back to the porch with Xanthous, giving him careful instructions as they went.

"The soldiers may be an eyesore for the neighbors, but at least they're disguised," she said. "I want you to stay here and watch over the twins. No one is to enter or leave this house without my permission."

Alex and Conner only heard the tail end of their conversation but it was enough to infuriate them.

"What do you mean no one can come or go?" Conner said. "We're going to be stuck in our own home?"

“Until it’s safe,” Grandma said.

“But I have to work,” Bob said. “I have patients and surgeries to attend to. People need me.”

Grandma thought on this for a few moments. “You may come and go as you wish,” she said. “With all due respect, it’s my grandchildren I’m worried about.”

“What about school?” Alex asked.

“You can go back as soon as everything has settled down and we figure out where your mother is, but for right now we can’t risk it,” Grandma said. “The less contact with the outside world, the better off you’ll be. I’ll write to the school and tell them you’ve both fallen terribly ill.”

“You can’t lock us up!” Conner yelled—loud enough for the whole street to hear.

“We haven’t done anything wrong!” Alex shouted. *“Why are you punishing us like this—”*

Their grandmother waved her wand at each of them and they went silent. They tried speaking but no sound came out; she had magically muted them.

“Please obey my instructions,” Grandma said. “Even with several soldiers, Xanthous, and Sir Lampton watching over you, I’ll be worried sick.”

Grandma looked down at Sir Lampton.

“I’d like for you to stay a dog for the time being,” she said. “The gnomes will attract enough unwanted attention as it is.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sir Lampton said with reluctance—he had been quietly hoping his dog days were over.

“Now, I must be going,” Grandma said. She waved her wand and the voices of her silenced grandchildren returned.

“So that’s it, then?” Conner said. “For a year we hear nothing from you and now suddenly it’s, ‘Hey, kids, your mom’s been kidnapped and, oh yeah, I’m putting you both on house arrest’?”

“I never thought you could do something like this to us, Grandma,” Alex said and looked at her grandmother as if she was a stranger.

Their grandma took these comments to heart. She didn’t like disappointing them, but unfortunately she had no choice—she could only do what she thought was best and hope they’d forgive her one day.

“I know you dislike me a great deal at the moment,” their grandmother said. “But you’re the only family I have left. You mean more to me than anything else in the world. One day when you have families of your own, you’ll learn that there is no length you wouldn’t go to to ensure their safety, even if they end up hating you for it.”

She left them on the porch, in the hands of the others, and walked off into the night, slowly disappearing into soft, sparkly clouds.

“I love you both,” she said sadly, and a second later, she was gone.

“We should get inside before anyone sees us lingering on the porch,” Xanthous said.

He and Lampton escorted Bob and the twins inside. Whether the lockdown would last days, weeks, months, or years wasn’t certain. But for the time being, the Bailey twins were prisoners in their own home.

The first few days of captivity went by very slowly for the twins. They couldn’t eat or sleep; all they could do was worry about their mother. The question that haunted them the most, however, was *why* had she been taken?

How could their mother, a simple nurse at a children’s hospital, have gotten involved in all of this? Why had their grandmother been taking such measures to protect her grandchildren in another dimension? Was their mother even in this world, or had she somehow been taken into the fairy-tale world?

Xanthous and Lampton were tight-lipped about the whole thing. Despite the daily pleas from the twins to tell them something—*anything*—they insisted no news was the best news.

Unfortunately, the twins’ imaginations did little to soothe their distress. Were the Troll King and Goblin King seeking revenge on the twins for stealing their crown a year ago? Had the Big Bad Wolf Pack somehow resurfaced? Did it have something to do with the Evil Queen and her Magic Mirror?

The twins didn’t have any answers and it was driving them mad.

Also testing their sanity was how crowded their home had become. Their rental house felt small with just three people and a dog, but now a dozen grown men had been added to the mix. The guest room had been filled with cots, and most of the downstairs looked like an army camp, with swords and shields and pieces of armor everywhere you looked.

Xanthous ran a tight ship while he looked after the Bailey home. He was very strict about the soldiers' shifts, making sure they rotated being gnomes and being in the house evenly. Meals were always served at precisely the same times every day. The twins were only allowed outside once a day, in their backyard, and only if Lampton was watching them.

Xanthous was very devoted to his duties, too. He spent every day glued to the window facing the front yard, and the twins never saw him sitting down for more than a few seconds.

Bob had been very kind and checked up on the twins every morning on his way to work. His stories of the sick children he was taking care of at the hospital were the only contact they had with the world outside, so they looked forward to it every morning.

The bags under his eyes were a clear indicator that he felt as helpless as the twins did. He also unsuccessfully tried getting information out of Xanthous and Lampton. At one point he tried bribing Lampton with a bright bouncy ball in exchange for Charlotte's supposed whereabouts, but it just offended him.

The twins tried making small talk with the soldiers they were practically living with, but it was apparent that they knew as little as the twins.

"Do you enjoy your time as a gnome every day?" Conner asked a soldier.

"It isn't altogether unpleasant," the soldier said with a shrug. "It gives me a lot of time to think."

"Speak for yourself," the other soldier said. "I had a pigeon sit on my head for four hours yesterday, and he left a present on me, if you catch my drift."

"Gross," Conner said.

"Can't you just turn back into a man and shoo it away?" Alex asked.

"I wish," the soldier explained. "We can only transform back if there's danger. Otherwise we'd all be shooing off pigeons and blowing our cover."

Alex and Conner made a mental note of this.

Later that night, the twins had just finished dinner when a bright flash came out of nowhere. The twins looked up, and floating down from the ceiling was a sky-blue envelope.

“It’s from the Fairy Godmother,” Xanthous said and flew up into the air to retrieve it—apparently a fairy didn’t need wings to fly. He hovered in the air a few feet above the ground while he read it, keeping it out of the twins’ sight.

Alex and Conner stood below him. Xanthous’s eyes grew large as he read the note from their grandmother. “I see,” he said when he was finished reading. He floated down and faced the twins.

“Your grandmother would like me to pass along some information to you,” Xanthous said.

“Yes?” Alex asked. They were practically vibrating with anticipation.

“We believe your mother is in our world,” Xanthous said. “That is all.” He placed the envelope on his shoulder and the flames devoured it.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Conner asked, unsatisfied with the update.

“Neither, it’s just information she’d like you to have at this time,” Xanthous said.

The twins let out exasperated sighs. Knowing more almost made it worse.

Later that night, Alex pulled Conner into her bedroom to speak with him privately. She turned up her radio so Lampton’s canine hearing couldn’t pick up what they were saying.

“Mom’s in the fairy-tale world,” she said to him. “You know what that means?”

“What?” Conner asked.

“It means I think Grandma may have lied to us,” Alex said. “How else could Mom have gotten there without her knowing about it? Maybe she isn’t the only fairy who’s capable of traveling between worlds.”

Conner nodded.

“I don’t think Grandma lied to us,” Conner said. “I think we’re just mad at her right now so now we’re trying to blame her for anything we can.”

Alex rubbed her tired eyes. She knew he wasn’t altogether wrong.

“Just a few days ago I was worried about Grandma and angry with Mom, and now I’m worried sick about Mom and furious with Grandma,” Alex said. “It’s crazy how fast things can change.”

“Yeah, it is,” Conner said with a sigh.

“How do you think Mom got there, then?” Alex asked him.

Conner thought on it for a good moment. “I wonder if there’s more than one way to get into the Land of Stories,” he said.

Alex’s head jerked back up at him. She had spent so much time hugging books and trying to re-create their last portal, she’d never thought about other options.

“Like what?” Alex asked.

“I don’t know,” Conner said. “But if Grandma’s storybook had the capability, I’m sure she would have created other ways over the years, right?”

“It would only make sense that she would have created other ways to come and go,” Alex said, thinking out loud. “Not for her, necessarily, but for the other fairies she recruited to help spread the stories around our world—right?”

Conner’s eyes widened and he pursed his lips.

“What’s your question?” Alex asked him.

“I hate that you guys know when I have a question!” Conner said and then asked, “Are you sure there’s no way you could make a portal on your own?”

Alex would have loved to believe that she was capable, too, but knew in her heart that if she was, she would have surely found a way by now.

“No, it was Grandma’s magic,” Alex said. “I just… I just…”

“Turned it on?” Conner asked.

“Right,” Alex said.

“Then I wonder if Grandma has anything else we could turn on,” Conner said.

Another thought dawned on Alex as soon as he said this. “And maybe that’s why she didn’t know where Mom was,” she said, nodding to herself. “Maybe someone had gotten hold of something, like her storybook, and used it to get to Mom.”

They looked to each other and small smiles appeared on their faces. They weren’t smiles of happiness, but smiles of achievement. They knew

they were on to something—they could feel it.

"But *who*?" Conner asked.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LOOSEY GOOSEY

The next evening the twins sat in the living room and watched the news with Lampton. He sat with his nose just a few inches away from the screen, completely mesmerized by it. His head was tilted and a single ear was raised.

“I must say, of all the technologies in this world I’ve been introduced to, this is by far my favorite!” Lampton said with a wagging tail. “The television is remarkable!”

“I’ve seen Magic Mirrors do much more impressive things,” said Xanthous, perched by the window, devotedly watching the neighborhood. “Although one thing I think I definitely could do without is the *fire alarm*. If I set it off one more time, I swear I’m going to yank it off the wall and smash it into pieces.”

“Well, with all due respect, being on fire in this world is never a good thing,” Conner said.

Xanthous raised an eyebrow judgmentally and turned back to his window. The flames on his shoulders rose in spite.

A bright flash suddenly filled the room. The twins looked up, and floating down from the ceiling was another sky-blue envelope, just like the day before. Once again, Xanthous flew up to retrieve it and read the new note from their grandmother in midair, away from the twins’ curious eyes.

When he was finished reading he placed it on his shoulder and let it burn away before returning to the ground.

“We’re leaving,” Xanthous said and immediately had the twins’ full attention. “Sir Lampton and I are being called back into our world.”

“Why?” Alex asked.

Xanthous took a moment to compose his response.

“The Fairy Godmother needs us there more than she needs us here,” he put simply. “But don’t worry, she’s sending in a replacement to watch over you.”

Conner grunted. “Oh, great,” he said with a massive eye roll. “Who’s going to babysit us now? Bingo and the tooth fairy?”

“No. Mother Goose is replacing us,” Xanthous said.

Alex and Conner stared blankly at him and then at each other. Was he being serious? Xanthous didn't seem like he had much of a sense of humor.

"What?" Xanthous asked them, with no trace of sarcasm. "I'm serious. She's flying in from Europe tonight."

"*The* Mother Goose?" Conner asked. "As in the 'Jack and Jill went up the hill' Mother Goose?"

"Yes, of course *that* Mother Goose," Xanthous said and looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Is there any *other* Mother Goose?"

"What is she doing in Europe?" Alex asked.

"Someone has to continue your grandmother's storytelling work while she deals with the crisis at home," Xanthous said. "But I wouldn't mention Jack and Jill to her, unless you want to hear her talk about conspiracies all night. Mother Goose has always been a bit of a… well… *handful*."

Mother Goose was the only member of the Happily Ever After Assembly the twins hadn't met in the Land of Stories, so they were looking forward to finally meeting her. However, the woman they expected her to be and the woman she actually was were very different *geese*.

A little past midnight, the twins were awoken by Lampton's shouts.

"She's here! She's here!" Lampton called through the house. "Mother Goose is landing!"

The twins met in the hall, rushed down the stairs together, and followed Xanthous and Lampton into the backyard. They looked up into the night sky but didn't see anything but stars and the moon.

"I don't see anything," Conner said.

"Trust me," Lampton said with his ears raised. "I can hear her."

Suddenly, a large silhouette flew past the moon. A large object was zooming toward them. The twins squinted, trying to see what it was. The closer it traveled, the more clearly they could see, riding on the back of a gigantic white goose, none other than Mother Goose herself.

"I have to admit, when you said she was flying in tonight, I wasn't expecting this," Conner said.

"Easy, Lester! Slow down, boy!" Mother Goose shouted in a raspy voice. She yanked on the reins of her large bird.

They were approaching so fast, the twins and Lampton dove under a patio table, taking cover. Xanthous remained exactly where he was, not deterred in the slightest—he had seen Mother Goose land before.

The goose landed hard on the ground with such a thud the entire house shook behind them. It felt like a mini-earthquake.

"Good lord, Lester! You call that a landing?!" Mother Goose reprimanded the horse-size goose. *"Meteors make softer impacts than that, you stupid gander!"*

Lester rolled his eyes, or at least the twins thought he did. His webbed feet were planted deep into the lawn, and he struggled to pull them out.

Mother Goose was a short, stout elderly woman. She had curly gray hair under a pointed black pilgrim hat that had a silver buckle on the front. She wore a baggy green dress with a white ruffled collar, large boots, and thick aviator goggles around her eyes.

"Are we even in the right place?" Mother Goose said, looking around. "I can't find my map—this is why I need to install a GPS in the back of your head."

Her goggles made her eyes appear enormous and obviously impaired her vision because she didn't see Xanthous standing directly in front of her.

"Hello, Mother Goose," Xanthous said with the little enthusiasm he could muster. "You're in the right place. Welcome to the Bailey home."

"Xanny, is that you?" Mother Goose asked and took off her goggles. Her face was red, weather-beaten from the flight. "Oh, Xanny, I am so glad to see you! I was worried Lester had taken us to Tijuana again. He loves Mexico."

Xanthous cringed at the nickname. "Besides the landing, I hope the rest of your flight went smoothly."

Mother Goose hopped down from Lester with difficulty. "Oh, it was fine, it was fine," she said. "Except when the *future pillow stuffing* here bumped into a 747 over Pittsburgh. *Stupid bird*."

Lester slowly shook his head. Obviously, he had a different side of the story.

"Those damn planes have gotten so big they don't leave much sky for the rest of us," Mother Goose said. "I should have never encouraged the Wright brothers—biggest mistake of my life!"

She did a few windmill stretches and the joints in her back cracked like fireworks. Alex, Conner, and Lampton cautiously climbed out from under the table and approached her.

“Mother Goose, let me introduce the twins,” Xanthous began. “This is Alex and Conner—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah—I’ve met the squirts before,” Mother Goose said. She put her hands on her hips and looked them up and down.

“You have?” Conner said.

“It was years ago, when you were babies. I visited you with your grandma,” Mother Goose told them. She pointed to Alex and then to Conner. “If memory serves me right, *you* never stopped crying, and *you* peed all over me when I changed your diaper.” She leaned close to them, eyeing them seriously. “I let it slide the first time, but history better not repeat itself.”

Alex and Conner both gulped; now they knew what Xanthous had meant. Mother Goose’s serious face broke into a giant smile and she cackled loudly.

“Relax, kids! I’m just yanking your tail feathers!” she said. Mother Goose turned to Lester and pulled a large basket off the goose’s back. “Carry in my luggage for me, would you, boy?”

She shoved the heavy basket into Conner’s arms and he grunted under its weight.

“And you,” Mother Goose said to Alex. “Would you mind fetching Lester a bucket of vegetables? He needs to eat after such a long flight. Just no broccoli; it gives him gas.”

The goose looked at her with large eyes and an open beak—appalled she would give out such personal information.

“Don’t look at me like that, Lester, it does!” Mother Goose said.

“You want *me* to *feed* him?” Alex said nervously and backed away from the oversize bird.

“Don’t be afraid of Lester, honey,” Mother Goose assured her. “He’s all squawk and no waddle.”

Xanthous and Lampton escorted Mother Goose inside the house. Conner lugged the basket behind them; it was so heavy he almost threw out his back. Alex went into the kitchen and tossed all the vegetables she could find into a large bowl for Lester.

Mother Goose looked around the Baileys’ rental house. “Not bad, not bad.”

“It’s just a rental house,” Conner said. “We’ve only been here a couple years.”

“I stayed with the old woman who lived in a shoe long before she had it renovated,” Mother Goose told him. “Trust me, after that, anything else seems like a palace. I’ll never forget that smell.”

“It’s become a bit of a prison for us recently,” Conner said.

“Young man, I’ve *visited* many prisons and *been visited* in many prisons—this is not a prison,” she said. “Put my basket by the fireplace, would you?”

Conner dragged the basket to the fireplace as he was ordered. Mother Goose reached inside it and pulled out an enormous wooden rocking chair. Conner couldn’t believe his eyes; it was so much larger than the basket. He wondered what else she had magically stuffed inside there.

Mother Goose took a seat in the rocking chair and kicked off her boots. Her feet were surprisingly small for someone who wore such big shoes.

“Xanny, would you light this thing for me, please?” Mother Goose asked and nodded to the fireplace.

Xanthous reluctantly flicked a hand in its direction. A ball of fire shot out of his index finger and onto the log in the fireplace.

“Thank you, Xanny,” Mother Goose said. “I suppose I can’t convince either of you to rub my feet?”

Conner and Xanthous just stared at her with a look that said *definitely not.* Mother Goose shrugged. “Sorry I asked,” she said.

Alex returned from feeding Lester and joined her brother.

Another bright flash filled the room; this time there was no envelope, but a white door appeared in the middle of the room. Alex and Conner eyed each other, knowing that it led to the fairy-tale world. They were tempted to make a run for it, but knew they’d be stopped if they did.

“That’ll be for us,” Xanthous said to Lampton. “Are you sure you can handle this, Mother Goose? I’ve been keeping the soldiers on a tight regimen. Two of them must be on guard in the house at all times while the rest rotate resting and guarding the outside of the house—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah—I know the drill,” Mother Goose said, rocking in her chair. “This isn’t my first rodeo, Xanny. I’ve been doing lockdowns since you were just a little matchstick. I’ll keep the munchkins safe, don’t worry.”

“Very well,” Xanthous said in a disgruntled tone. His flames flickered faster than ever. “Come along, Sir Lampton.”

The dog ran over to the door. “Good-bye, children,” Sir Lampton said. “Please stay safe. I hope to see you soon.”

Xanthous opened the door for Lampton and he ran through it. Xanthous stepped inside but looked back at the twins before closing it. “Respect your grandmother’s wishes,” he said and closed the door behind him.

The door vanished and the twins felt more despondent than ever.

Mother Goose waited until they were gone and then began digging around in her basket.

“Where did I put my bubbly?” she asked herself. Her entire arm was inside the basket searching for it. “Here it is,” she said and withdrew a large metal thermos. She took a giant swig from it and let out a satisfied *“Ahhh.”*

Alex and Conner looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes and slight smirks appeared on their faces.

“What are you two smirking at?” Mother Goose asked them.

“Nothing,” Alex said and dropped her smile.

“You’re just not what we expected,” Conner said, and his smile grew twice as large.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Mother Goose asked with a raised eyebrow.

Conner shrugged. “I sort of always expected you to be, well, a giant goose in a bonnet reading nursery rhymes to small children,” he said.

“That’s a common misconception,” Mother Goose said and took another swig from her thermos. “Sometimes Lester likes to dress up in my bonnets; it makes him feel fancy but it messes with my image. *Don’t look at me like that, Lester! Don’t do it if you don’t want people talking about it!*”

Lester was staring in at her through the window from the backyard. His bill was wide open and his eyes were squinting. Then he made himself comfortable on the grass and went to sleep, embarrassed enough for one day.

“He’s so sensitive,” Mother Goose said.

“Where’d you find a giant goose?” Alex asked.

“I’ve had him for years,” Mother Goose said. “I was gambling with a couple of ogres in the Dwarf Forests and won a giant golden egg in a game

of cards. I was so excited—thought I was rich! You can imagine my disappointment when he hatched out of it the next day."

"Wow," Conner said. He didn't know what was more interesting, the fact that Lester hatched out of a golden egg or that Mother Goose was a gambler.

"Oh well," Mother Goose said and took another swig of bubbly. "I've put him to work over the years. He's been my main source of transportation. I hate flying commercial planes, I get too seasick to travel on ships, and my driver's license has been suspended for years."

The more she drank, the heavier her eyes became and the looser her neck seemed to become, because her head began to swivel. She held the thermos up to the twins. "Forgive me, did you want some?" she asked.

"I don't think we're legally allowed to have whatever's in there," Alex said.

"Suit yourself," Mother Goose said.

Alex was starting to have serious reservations about her. Conner stared up at her in awe; she was gradually becoming his favorite fairy-tale character *ever*.

He looked inside her basket. "What else is in there?" Conner asked. "Are those passports?"

Mother Goose quickly shut the lid of her basket and stared at him. He let out an apologetic laugh.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to invade your privacy, just wondering why you have so many?"

"Look, kids," she said, peeved. "When you've lived as long as I have and have traveled as much as I do, you make some enemies along the way. I'm not like your grandmother; I don't get along with everyone. Some cultures and countries that I'll refrain from naming don't appreciate a strongly opinionated dame such as myself."

Mother Goose nodded confidently to herself and took another swig. Alex and Conner nodded along with her, afraid to disagree.

"Always have a plan B and a friend with bail, and you're guaranteed to never fail," Mother Goose said and took another drink. "That's my motto."

Her words were starting to slur and her eyes began to flutter as they grew heavier.

“Where were you in Europe?” Alex asked, desperately trying to change the subject.

“I was at a children’s hospital in Romania, then stopped by an orphanage in Albania,” Mother Goose said.

The twins looked at each other to see if the other had noticed, but she seemed to be rhyming the more she drank.

“What stories did you read to them?” Conner asked, stopping her from slipping into unconsciousness. He was so amused he didn’t want it to end.

“I read them ‘Jack and Jill,’ ‘Little Miss Muffet’—the usual; they were a tough crowd, thought I was delusional.” She yawned but kept her eyes open, excited by the new topic. *“Muffet can sometimes be a bit of a diva, but she can’t help her severe arachnophobia.”*

There was no denying it; Mother Goose was in full rhyming mode.

“Cool,” Conner laughed. “What about Jack and Jill? I’ve always wondered what they were *really* doing on that hill.”

Alex elbowed him. Mother Goose sat up in her rocking chair. Conner knew whatever she was about to tell them was going to be good. Alex wasn’t sure if she wanted to hear it.

“Jack and Jill went up that hill, for a supposed pail of water,” Mother Goose said. *“Jack fell down, broke his crown, ’cause Jill pushed him—but no one caught her!”*

“No way!” Conner said with an intrigued smile.

Mother Goose bobbed her head up and down, sloppily nodding.

“Why did Jill push Jack down the hill?” Alex asked.

Mother Goose chuckled to herself. *“Jack is nimble, Jack is quick—but Jack can be such a—”* She stopped herself from finishing the thought, perhaps remembering she was talking to thirteen-year-olds. “I think I’ve had enough bubbly for one night. It’s time for bed anyway.”

Mother Goose put her thermos in her basket and shooed the twins off. Her head touched her chest, her eyes closed, and she fell into a deep sleep in her rocking chair. She snored like a grizzly bear.

“I like her!” Conner said with a goofy grin, climbing up the stairs to bed.

“She’s quite the gossip, isn’t she?” Alex said.

“Sure is,” he said. “And she really lets loose after a few sips of whatever she was drinking.”

Alex paused halfway up the staircase and looked back at their sleeping caretaker. “Yeah, she certainly does.…” She began forming a plan in her head.

Alex tossed and turned all night long, having the worst nightmare of her life. It started off as the same dream she had been having for months; she and her brother ran happily through the woods only to be kept outside of their grandmother’s cottage. However, this time when they peered through the window they didn’t see their grandmother, but their mother. She was crying and whispered, *“Help me!”* over and over until Alex woke up.

Alex was shaking and sweaty and began crying. For all she knew, it wasn’t just a dream. Her mother could be in serious danger or seriously hurt.

Alex couldn’t live like this anymore. She needed to find out what was going on by any means possible.

Later, when the rest of the house had woken, Alex went downstairs and found Conner, Mother Goose, and Bob having breakfast.

“Good morning,” Bob said. “How’d you sleep?”

“I didn’t,” Alex said.

“Sounds like we had similar nights,” Conner said, looking at her with bags under his own eyes.

“I’ll pour you some cereal,” Mother Goose said. She went into the kitchen and poured milk and cereal from a box of Mother Goose Grits. A cartoon illustration of a much happier and smiling Mother Goose was displayed on the box.

She placed the bowl of cereal in front of Alex. “Goose grits?” Alex said. “Should I ask?”

“Don’t judge me,” Mother Goose said. “I usually hate the depictions of me in this world—they’re normally so degrading. But I tried having an open mind about this cereal when they came out with it, and I’ve been addicted ever since.”

Alex shrugged and took a bite—it wasn’t half bad.

“Mother Goose was just explaining to Bob all about the fairy-tale world,” Conner said.

“Fascinating stuff,” Bob said. He was eager to continue their conversation. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you and the other fairies have been around for hundreds of years traveling between worlds telling stories to children in need?”

“That’s it in a golden eggshell,” Mother Goose said.

“So you must be thousands of years old,” Bob said.

Mother Goose shot him a dirty look. “Hold your horses there, cowboy,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m older than dirt, but I’m not as old as you think. This world used to run much faster than ours. You’ve had so many different eras and periods: the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Age, and now the Modern Age.… We’ve only had three or so that I can recall.”

“What were they?” Alex asked, keen on learning a bit of the fairy-tale world’s history.

“Let me think,” Mother Goose said. “We had the Dragon Age, the Age of Magic, and we’re currently in the Golden Age. Well, it used to be the Golden Age until all this drama happened.”

“The Dragon Age?” Conner asked excitedly. “You mean there were dragons in the fairy-tale world?”

“Tons of them,” Mother Goose said. “It was a mess! Disasters and barbecues left and right! They’re extinct now, kind of like your dinosaurs.”

“Did you ever see one?” Conner asked.

“I used to wrestle them, long before I took up magic and storytelling,” Mother Goose said with a boastful smile.

Conner squinted at her. “Are you pulling my leg?” he asked.

Mother Goose rolled up her sleeve and showed Conner a large burn mark on her forearm. “*This* isn’t from cooking, kid,” she said.

Conner just stared at her with an open mouth. He had never been so impressed by someone in his entire life, and Mother Goose milked the admiration for all it was worth.

“You were around for the Middle Ages and the Renaissance?” Alex asked. “You must have seen so many people and places!”

“I started the Renaissance, honey,” Mother Goose said, like it was a tea party she had thrown.

The twins felt they were both being led on now.

“I did!” Mother Goose said. “It was just me, your grandmother, Rosette, Skylene, and Violetta back then. We were so bored in the human world that one night I threw a big party. We had a great time. Next thing I know, we come back a few decades later and all of Europe had copied us.”

“Our grandma was there?” Conner asked.

“Oh, yes,” Mother Goose said. “She was a lot of fun back then. After she had your father she became so *motherly*. That’s how she got her title, the Fairy Godmother—from being so sweet and maternal to everyone.” Alex and Conner exchanged a look. However upset they were with their grandmother, she still became more amazing the more they learned about her.

“You know,” Mother Goose continued, “Leonardo da Vinci and I had a bit of a fling.”

Alex gasped. “I don’t believe you! Now you’re making things up!”

Mother Goose rolled her eyes and looked directly into Alex’s, serious as can be. “Why do you think he tried building that flying machine? He was trying to keep up with me and Lester. *Hey, Lester, tell these kids I dated Leonardo! They don’t believe me!”*

Lester appeared at the kitchen window. He nodded, confirming the news for the twins. They were astonished.

“Of course, I didn’t go by Mother Goose back then,” she said. “My code name was Mona Lisa.”

“You’re the *Mona Lisa*?” Conner asked.

“The famous painting?” Alex asked.

“Why do teenagers always think people are lying to them? I’ve got no reason to be dishonest with you,” Mother Goose told them. “Leo, as I used to call him, made me laugh. But that’s apparent in my portrait.”

Alex and Conner glared at her with their mouths hanging open. They didn’t know what to believe anymore.

“Why did you have a code name?” Conner asked.

“I told you, I’ve got enemies!” Mother Goose said. “I’ve had several aliases over the years… Guinevere, Mona Lisa, Lady Godiva, the Goose Flu… those were all me. But now I just simply go by Mother Goose. It fits me the best.”

Bob was just as bewildered as the twins were. There he sat, a man of education and science, slowly losing faith in everything he thought he knew.

“So you and the fairies have been spreading the same fairy tales all this time?” Bob asked.

“We spread them as they happen,” Mother Goose said. “Our more recent history has had the biggest impact on this world—the stories of Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Cinderella, blah blah blah—that’s why we call it the Golden Age. Unfortunately, the more this world began to develop, the faster it seemed to go by in comparison to our world. We were afraid the stories would get lost over time, so we recruited a few people in this world to help us.”

“Like the Brothers Grimm?” Bob asked, starting to understand.

“The Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Walt Disney…” Mother Goose listed. “But we stopped recruiting protégés and mostly do it ourselves these days. There isn’t a time difference to be worried about anymore. And things became so calm in our world after the Happily Ever After Assembly was formed, we needed something to do.”

“The Happily Ever After Assembly?” Bob asked.

“It’s sort of like their United Nations,” Alex said. “All the kings and queens signed a treaty to regulate peace.”

“All the kings and queens, the Fairy Godmother, the Fairy Council, and I make up the assembly. We’ve watched over the treaty since it was created,” Mother Goose said. “It’s been working out really well. Our world has stayed pretty peaceful… well, until *now*, that is.”

Mother Goose eyed the twins—she had been told she wasn’t supposed to bring up the current situation.

Bob nodded slightly. “I think I’m starting to understand it all,” he said. “Except one thing: You said there *was* a time difference between the worlds? What happened?”

Mother Goose gestured to the twins. “These two showed up,” she said with a smile. “They were the first children born of both worlds and somehow linked them together. Magic works in mysterious ways, always has.”

Bob looked over at the twins with an impressed grin on his face.

“We’re kind of a big deal,” Conner said.

Bob smiled at him. “Well, you *think* you know someone, right, guys?” he said with a wink.

Bob left for work within the hour and the twins began another day of moping around the house with only their worries to entertain themselves with. They had grown very tired of the same concerns rotating in their heads.

The next couple days weren’t as tense as the last week had been. Mother Goose wasn’t as strict as Xanthous, and it was a huge relief for the twins. The soldiers had to wake her in the middle of her naps to remind her of the “gnoming shifts.”

Alex’s spirits were raised by seeing how much Conner bonded with Mother Goose. The two became practically inseparable. During the day they would sit at the window looking at the front of the house and play pranks on the mailman (Mother Goose would wiggle an ear and magically move the mailbox whenever he would turn his back). After dinner, if they weren’t watching professional wrestling, Mother Goose and Conner would play cards with the soldiers. She even taught him how to hide an ace in his sleeve.

Alex didn’t fill him in on the plan that had been forming in her head for days. She already felt guilty enough breaking her grandma’s wishes alone; she didn’t want to drag her brother into it.

One night Conner went to bed early and Alex stayed up, keeping an eye on Mother Goose. She was sitting at the kitchen table, thermos in hand, reminiscing about the fairy-tale world with the soldiers. Alex could tell she was having a little too much fun, because her eyes were glazed over and she was slurring and rhyming her words.

“I haven’t had this much fun since I was so very young—and used to rub-a-dub-dub with the three men in the tub!” Mother Goose laughed and passed her thermos around the table. The soldiers each took a long swig and their eyes began to droop, too, as time went by.

“Mother Goose, may I confess something to you?” one of the soldiers said sadly. “I was one of the king’s men who tried to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. I know you were very close; I’m so sorry we couldn’t help him.”

Mother Goose’s eyes filled with tears as she was reminded of her late friend and the night he had his tragic accident.

“Humpty and I sat on that wall, Humpty and I had such a ball,” she said. *“Humpty had a fall, right there and right then, because poor Humpty couldn’t hold his gin.* I miss that egg so much!”

Mother Goose buried her face into her hands and cried drunken tears for a few minutes.

She woke a few moments later, collected her thermos, and took a seat in her rocking chair by the fireplace.

She snapped her fingers and a fire appeared in the fireplace. She went to take one last swig from her thermos but was disappointed to discover she and the soldiers had drunk it all. This was the moment Alex had been waiting for.

She snuck into the kitchen and retrieved the bottle of champagne that Bob had brought the night of the proposal. Alex hoped she could put it to good use tonight.

Mother Goose began to doze off again in her rocking chair when she was startled by a loud *pop*. Alex opened the champagne bottle right behind her.

“Care for a refill?” Alex asked and gestured to the empty thermos Mother Goose held in a tight grip.

“Oh, that’s very kind,” Mother Goose said, a little discombobulated. She held up her thermos and Alex filled it all the way to the top and set the champagne bottle aside.

“You’ve got a heavy pour; you’re my kind of girl,” Mother Goose said and took her first sip. “This is good stuff. Are you sure it isn’t being saved for anything special?”

“Bob was saving it for when he was going to propose to my mom, but that all went out the window when she was kidnapped,” Alex said restlessly and took a seat on the floor next to Mother Goose’s chair.

“Kids as good as the two of you shouldn’t go through what you’ve been through,” Mother Goose said sadly and lovingly stroked Alex’s hair. Her eyes were sad but grew heavier and glassier with every swig of the thermos she took. Alex almost had her where she wanted her—*almost*.

“Conner and I have been through so much together, and we’ve always been capable of handling anything that came our way,” Alex said. “So you can imagine why it’s so frustrating not knowing anything. It doesn’t matter how fast we had to grow up; we’re still being treated like children.”

A loud snoring sound came from Mother Goose; she had dozed off. Alex tapped her until she was awake again.

"Hmmm?" Mother Goose said with one eye open. "What were you saying, honey?"

Alex thought fast. Mother Goose was somewhere between consciousness and dreamland, and Alex wanted to take full advantage of it.

"You were just telling me about how bad it is in the fairy-tale world," Alex said, nodding her head a little too convincingly.

Mother Goose bobbed her head up and down. *"Things are bad to say the very least—vines and thornbush still cover the East,"* she said and then looked around in a daze. "I think I've had too much bubbly, the room is spinning—"

"That's terrible," Alex said and immediately refilled Mother Goose's thermos. "But surely the Happily Ever After Assembly can handle vines and thornbushes, right?"

Alex pushed the thermos in her direction. Mother Goose took another sip from it.

"The vines and thorns are not what's awful—it's the magic behind them that's too darn powerful," Mother Goose said. *"They tried finding her before she struck—we ran out of time and out of luck."* Her head fell to her chest and she dozed off again. Alex shook her awake. It was more difficult this time.

"I'm sorry, dear, I don't mean to keep falling asleep in the middle of your sentences," Mother Goose said. She was practically cross-eyed from exhaustion. "What were you saying?"

Alex thought quickly again. "I was just saying I hope you find her, whoever you're looking for," she said.

Mother Goose nodded. She gently touched the side of Alex's face. *"Don't fret on the idea—they'll soon find Ezmia,"* Mother Goose said.

Alex had never heard the name before. *"Ezmia?"* she asked. "Who is Ezmia?"

Mother Goose's eyes grew twice in size. If she hadn't been so intoxicated she would have sat straight up in her seat. Alex knew this was some of the information that was supposed to be kept from her and her brother.

“Oh dear,” Mother Goose said and hiccupped. “Please don’t tell your grandmother what I’ve said.”

“I won’t, I swear,” Alex said. Mother Goose slumped with relief. “As long as you tell me who she is,” Alex added.

Mother Goose tensed up as much as she could with all the bubbly in her system. “I can’t. I promised your grandmother that I wouldn’t say a word!” she said.

“Then don’t *say* it; *rhyme* it,” Alex said. She stood up and looked closely into Mother Goose’s eyes, more desperate for information than ever. “I’m going to find out eventually. It’s only a matter of time—so please just tell me, who is Ezmia?”

Mother Goose looked around the house to make sure they were alone and took one final swig from her thermos. She looked away from Alex and into the fire, not wanting to make eye contact with Alex while she gave up the information she had sworn not to give.

“For years the world presumed she was dead—her whereabouts were unknown and left unsaid. In the shadows she stayed, quietly plotting, a vengeful wrath she planned on igniting. Driven by rage and centuries of sorrows, a suppressed fear shall soon be tomorrow’s. After failing to curse a princess’s death, she’s now set her sights on the world’s last breath. ‘Happily ever after’ will be a thing of the past—for the evil Enchantress has returned at last.…”

Mother Goose closed her eyes, not from fatigue this time, but from shame. Alex had hung on to every word.

“The *Enchantress*?” Alex asked, putting together the pieces of her rhyme. “The evil Enchantress who tried killing Sleeping Beauty is *back*?”

“Yes,” Mother Goose said. “Her name is Ezmia, and she has your *mother*.…”

Her chin fell on her chest and she went into the deepest sleep Alex had ever seen. Her snores filled the silent house.

Alex’s eyes darted around the room. Her heart was racing. She had to catch her breath, because learning this information knocked the wind out of her. It was as if Alex’s brain had switched to autopilot. She immediately ran up the stairs and into her bedroom. She dumped all the schoolbooks and supplies out of her backpack and piled in as many clothes as she could fit. She threw a sweater over her head and put on her running shoes.

Alex ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. She stocked all the food and necessities she knew she would need on a long trip: knives, matches, water bottles, etc. She wasn't even that careful passing by the soldiers who were passed out at the table. Even if she was caught making a run for it, she was so determined, she didn't think anyone or anything could stop her.

She went out the front door and steered her bike off the porch and into the street. She glanced back at all the gnomes, and while they remained completely still, she knew the soldiers inside were anything but.

"I know you can't stop me, because I'm not in any danger," Alex called out to the gnomes. "Yet," she said under her breath.

She pedaled off into the night as fast as she could, knowing it'd only be a matter of time before one of the soldiers or Mother Goose came after her. Alex didn't have much of a plan, but she knew where she was headed; she was going to her grandmother's cottage in the mountains.

The trips her family used to take when she and her brother were small to visit their grandmother always took a couple hours by car, so she knew she had a long journey ahead of her by bike. But if there was any place she would find something of her grandmother's to "set off" or "turn on" that gave her an entrance into the fairy-tale world, she knew it would be there.

Alex took one final look back at her house before it disappeared. A little voice inside her head told her it would be a long time before she saw it again, but she welcomed the feeling. She didn't care what her grandmother's wishes were; Alex was going to find a way into the Land of Stories and save her mom—even if she died trying.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE COTTAGE

Alex woke up in a grassy field the next afternoon. She looked around and grunted to herself. She had been riding her bike all night and had just stopped to rest for a moment off the road. Clearly, that moment had lasted a few hours longer than she'd planned.

She was in the foothills leading up to the mountains where her grandmother's cottage was. It had been a great while since the last time she and her brother had gone, so it was difficult remembering the exact directions. As the foothills slowly rose into mountain terrain, she stopped at a tiny gas station and purchased a map. Navigating became harder as the roads wound and forked up into the mountains. She glanced back and forth at the map as she continued, making sure she was traveling northeast. She remembered her parents used to drive northeast until there were no more roads to take.

Alex felt guilty for leaving her brother at home but hadn't wanted to drag him into her spontaneous plan. Although, when night fell and Alex was forced to set up a small camp off the road by herself, she really wished her brother were there, keeping her company.

She couldn't make up her mind if it was more dangerous to be traveling in the woods of the fairy-tale world or her world. Even though there were no Big Bad Wolves to be worried about, she was sure there were still regular wolves around.

But if she couldn't handle a simple wolf now, how was she going to take down a powerful Enchantress when she found her? She doubted swinging a big stick would scare off the woman who'd cursed an entire kingdom for one hundred years.

The more she thought about it, the less it made sense. What did this Ezmia woman want with her mother anyway? How did she even get to her mom in the first place? If the fairies couldn't find her or her mother, what made Alex think she could?

Alex and her brother knew more about the Enchantress than others gave them credit for. During their encounter with the Evil Queen they

discovered that the Enchantress had kidnapped the Evil Queen when she was a girl and used her in a scheme to take over the fairy-tale world.

Alex lay on the ground, using her backpack as a pillow, and let her troubled thoughts wander until she finally fell asleep.

Alex was back on her bike before sunrise the next day. She biked across windy road after windy road until the middle of the afternoon. She jolted forward and almost fell off her bike when her front tire hit a particularly sharp rock and went flat.

"You've got to be kidding me!" she said and angrily tossed her useless bike to the side of the road. She would have to travel by foot for the rest of her journey—however long that would be.

Her spirits rose an hour or so afterward when she saw a wooden bridge on the road ahead. When Alex and Conner were younger, seeing this bridge meant they were almost at their grandmother's house. Alex knew she was close.

She jogged toward the bridge in relief, but the closer she got, the less familiar it appeared. It seemed so small compared to the one in her memories. Was it just because she was so much smaller then? Also disheartening was how decrepit the bridge appeared to be. Every piece of wood was chipped and rotting like crazy.

Alex took a couple of steps onto the bridge and examined it closer. It didn't feel right. A car could never fit on the bridge. She looked over the side. Several hundred feet below was a dry and rocky riverbed. The bridge her family used to drive over was only a few feet higher than the stream that ran under it.

Alex sighed. She was lost.

She turned on her heels and started to head back when she heard a sudden crack. Before she could tell where the sound was coming from, Alex fell straight through the bridge, rotten wood splitting under her feet.

She screamed and grabbed hold of the bridge. She desperately tried pulling herself up, but it was no use; she could hear the wood cracking from the pressure.

"Help!" Alex screamed. *"Somebody help me!"*

Alex didn't know who she was yelling to. As far as she knew she was alone in the mountains and she was about to fall to her death.

“No! No! No!” Alex said to herself. *“It can’t end like this! It can’t end like this!”*

She struggled to pull herself up again. Another loud crack sounded and she slipped further through the bridge and toward the rocky ground below.

Alex felt two hands grab hers just in the nick of time. She looked up and saw a very familiar face looking down at her. At first she thought it was her dad but then realized it was Conner—it was a strange moment to notice how much he had grown up.

His face turned bright red as he struggled to hold his sister with all his might. *“Now, Lester! Pull us up, buddy!”* he grunted.

Conner and Alex were slowly dragged upward. Once Alex was above the bridge again, she could see Lester’s bill tightly clutching Conner’s pants, dragging him up while he dragged her. The giant goose pulled them across the bridge until they were safely on solid ground again.

The twins and Lester stayed on the ground until they all caught their breath.

“I hate you so much right now,” Conner said between heavy pants.

“That’s funny, because I’ve never loved you more,” Alex said with a big smile and rolled over to give her brother a big hug. “Thank you. I owe you one!”

“Luckily, with the amount of trouble we get ourselves into, I know you’ll have a chance to make it up to me,” he said.

Lester squawked at them as if to say, *“Don’t worry about me, I’m fine!”*

“She owes you one, too, Lester, don’t worry!” Conner said.

The twins stood up and brushed themselves off. They were covered in splinters and chips of rotting wood. Lester got to his feet, too, and stretched out his neck and bill.

“How did you know where I was?” Alex asked.

“Lucky guess!” Conner said. “You can’t even run away like a normal teenager. You’re supposed to leave a note! There was only one place I figured you were going. Lester and I had been flying around looking for you all day when we finally spotted your bike down the road.”

“Does Mother Goose know where I am?” Alex asked.

“I’ve been covering for you since I realized you were gone. I told Mother Goose you were sick and were vomiting all over your room. Then,

when she wasn't looking, I hijacked her goose and came looking for you," Conner said.

"How did you manage that one?" Alex asked.

"Well, apparently he feels taken for granted and thought by helping me it would teach Mother Goose a lesson," Conner said. "I don't speak goose or anything, but I'm guessing that's the gist of it, right, boy?"

Conner turned to Lester and the giant goose nodded.

"Why didn't you take me with you?" he asked angrily. "How could you leave me locked up at home? Are you trying to do things solo now or something? Not cool, Alex."

Alex lowered her head shamefully. "Because Grandma's going to be mad enough at me when she finds out I took off, I didn't want to drag you into it," she said. "And I found out who has Mom! I pried it out of Mother Goose."

"So that's why you took off so abruptly?" Conner said. "Well, who has her?! What did you learn?!"

Alex now understood why her grandmother had kept information from them. She felt horrible knowing she was about to make her brother as stressed as she was.

"Apparently the Enchantress is back," Alex told him. "The Enchantress who cursed Sleeping Beauty is terrorizing the fairy-tale world again and she has Mom."

"What?" he said in disbelief. "What does the Enchantress want with Mom?"

"I don't know," Alex said. "I've been trying to figure it out and can't think of anything."

"Wait, I thought the Enchantress was dead," Conner said. "The Evil Queen told us that she poisoned her and she ran off and died. Remember?"

"I guess she was wrong," Alex said. "Ezmia is her name—and she's very much alive."

"And that's why we hadn't seen Grandma in so long?" Conner said.

"I suppose," Alex said.

Conner paced around the mountain road, thinking.

"We've got to get into the fairy-tale world," Conner said. "We have to save Mom."

“I agree, but what are we going to do when we get there? What can we do to save her that the fairies can’t?” Alex asked.

“We may not be able to do anything,” Conner said. “But two more people *trying* couldn’t hurt. Besides, it sure beats sitting around and waiting for bad news.”

A small smile appeared on Alex’s face; she couldn’t have agreed more.

“Let’s try to get to Grandma’s cottage before sundown,” Alex said. “Do you know where we are? Are we even close?”

Conner looked around at the mountains surrounding them. “Yeah, we’re close!” he said and then pointed to a flat mountain peak in the distance. “Grandma’s cottage is just on the other side of that mountain peak! I remember seeing it when we were little and hoping it was a volcano!”

“Are you sure?” Alex asked.

“Positive,” Conner said. “Let’s go. Lester, can you take us in the direction of that mountain peak?”

Lester cocked his head in the direction Conner pointed, let out an exaggerated sigh, and then nodded.

Conner climbed onto Lester’s back, then offered his hand to Alex. “Climb aboard,” he said.

Alex hesitated. “Are you sure this is safe?” she asked.

Lester squawked, rather insulted.

“You’ve got to try this, Alex,” Conner said enthusiastically. “I understand why O.M.G. travels this way.”

“O.M.G.?” Alex asked.

“Old Mother Goose,” Conner said. “It’s my nickname for her—she calls me C-Dog.”

Alex shrugged and took his hand. She swung a leg over the large goose and held tightly to her brother’s waist.

Conner gripped the reins, ready for liftoff. “Let’s fly, Lester!” he said.

Lester spread his wings; his wingspan was much more impressive in the daylight. He took a few steps back and then bolted into a fast waddle forward, flapping his wings as he went, and they rose higher and higher into the air.

Conner was right, it was an incredible experience. The mountains seemed much more majestic from a bird’s perspective. The twins had never

felt so free in their lives.

“I hope no one sees us,” Alex said, fearfully looking down at all the roads and tiny towns underneath them.

“I just hope it isn’t goose-hunting season,” Conner said.

Lester squawked and looked back at him, terrified.

“I’m just kidding, Lester,” Conner said. “Relax before you lay an egg!”

Lester headed in the direction of the peak. A few moments later, they were flying over it. Conner was a little disappointed to see it was in fact a flat mountaintop and there was no sign of molten lava inside of it.

“Keep an eye out for the cottage,” he told his sister. “It should be coming up any moment now.”

Alex scanned the ground below. It was hard to see anything but treetops and the occasional chimney. She saw a familiar bridge and her eyes followed the winding road that crossed over it and through the woods ahead. At the very end of the road, she could make out the roof of a storybook cottage.

“I see it! I see it!” Alex said and pointed to it. “It’s Grandma’s cottage!”

Lester landed in front of the cottage just as the sun began setting. Alex and Conner climbed off the goose and observed their grandmother’s old home.

“Whoa,” Conner said.

“It’s definitely not in the same condition we left it in,” Alex said.

It was obvious that no one had lived in the cottage for a long time. The front lawn was partially dead and overgrown in some places; the flower beds were full of weeds and blades of grass were almost as tall as the twins. Ivy grew up the sides of the cottage and part of the roof had caved in.

Their grandmother’s blue car was parked outside but hadn’t been driven in years. A layer of dirt covered it, and a city of spiderwebs had been spun between the tires.

Although the cottage was used mostly as a prop, since their grandmother only lived here when the twins visited, it still was the location of the twins’ happiest childhood memories. They were sad to see how abandoned it was.

Alex and Conner approached the front door apprehensively.

“Lester, bon appétit,” Conner said and gestured to the overgrown grass. Lester squawked and happily went to town on it.

“Do you think it’s locked?” Alex asked.

Conner twisted the handle and the door creaked open, answering her question.

The twins stepped inside and surveyed the interior. It was exactly how they remembered it, except dusty and covered in cobwebs. Grandma’s rocking chair was still by the fireplace and faced a large rug the twins used to lie on when she read to them.

“It’s so strange to see everything again,” Alex said. “Grandma’s chair, the fireplace, the kitchen table—I almost can’t believe it’s been here this whole time.”

“Do you remember the forts we used to build with Dad under that thing?” Conner asked, pointing to the table.

“How could I forget?” Alex asked. “You always tried keeping me out, but Dad never let you.”

“You know what’s funny?” Conner said as he walked around. “Even though we know now that Grandma never actually lived here, whenever I picture Grandma I always imagine her in this place, baking cookies or reading by the fireplace.”

“Me too,” Alex said. “Most of our childhood was a front, but it was a happy front.”

“You think we’ll find something that can take us to the fairy-tale world in here?” Conner asked.

“We have to,” Alex said simply. But she had her doubts. She wasn’t sure what she was searching for, but knew she’d know what it was as soon as she saw it.

Conner looked at all the dusty frames on top of the fireplace mantel. They were mostly pictures of him and his sister at birthday parties and holidays with their family. In one picture the twins were three years old and sitting on Santa’s lap. Conner was very chubby and had a big grin on his face; Alex was crying hysterically.

“Check out this picture of us with Santa.” Conner laughed. “You look like he’s about to eat you.”

“I was preparing myself for the other fictional characters that *did* try to eat us,” Alex said.

Conner snickered and picked up another photo. “No way! Look how young Mom and Dad look in this photo! I don’t think we were even born yet.”

Alex walked over and looked at it for herself. “Conner, we look just like them,” she said. “There’s no denying that they’re our parents.”

“You’re right,” Conner said. “I came up with a whole adoption theory when I found out we were part fairy. But looking at this picture kind of tosses that out the window.”

Alex went back to searching, confident something would pop up at any moment.

“Have you found anything that seems portal-worthy?” Conner asked her.

“Not yet,” Alex said. “Well, except for maybe *this*.”

Alex was staring up at a beautiful painting on the wall. She remembered it from when she was little, and, unlike the rest of the cottage, the painting had remained just as vibrant. It was a watercolor painting of a pond and had beautiful shades of greens and blues.

There was something about it that seemed more familiar now, as if they had been there.

“You think the painting could take us into the Land of Stories?” Conner asked.

“It worked in one of the Narnia books,” Alex said.

She stepped closer to the painting and placed a hand on its frame.

“It’s the Ugly Duckling Pond!” Alex said, recognizing it. “This is it! This has to be our way in! Why else would Grandma hang a picture of a pond in her cottage?”

“You think you can get it to work?” Conner said.

“I can try,” Alex said.

She placed both of her hands on the golden frame and tried to will it to life. Nothing happened. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, willing it even harder. Still, nothing happened.

Conner clapped his hands loudly, breaking his sister’s concentration. “Clap on!” he said.

“What are you doing?” Alex asked him.

“Just thinking of other ways to turn it on,” he said. “Is there a remote control or an on switch somewhere? Maybe it’s like a plasma screen.”

Alex ignored him and went back to focusing. She imagined all the places and people she had met during her first visit. She imagined all the castles and forests she and her brother had seen. She imagined all the dangerous animals and creatures they had encountered. But mostly, she thought of how desperately she wanted to see them again. Alex thought of her grandmother, her father, and her mother. She thought of the pond in the painting, the lily pads, the fireflies, and of its *water*.

To the twins' amazement, the painting began to glow.

"You did it!" Conner said and hugged his sister. "You set it off!"

"I did?" Alex asked—it was almost too good to be true. *"I did it! I did it!"*

The twins jumped up and down with excitement, but their excitement quickly faded into fear. The painting began to glow brighter and brighter, and the cottage began to rattle. It felt like a large train was passing directly below them.

"Exactly *how* did the Narnia kids travel through the painting?" Conner asked, slowly stepping away from theirs.

"Uh-oh."

The cottage stopped shaking and the painting dimmed, only now the painted pond was gone—the canvas was completely blank.

"Huh?" Alex said. "That's strange."

"A bit of a relief, though," Conner said. "I was worried for a second that water was going to spill out of the—"

CRASH! A tidal wave of water crashed through the windows by the front door. The twins screamed and ran to the back of the cottage. *CRASH!* Another tidal wave came rushing toward them from the back. *CRASH!* Water was gushing through every door and window and flooding the cottage.

"What is going on?!" Conner yelled. *"Did we hit an iceberg?!"*

He described it perfectly: They felt like they were sinking—and sinking fast. They were already waist-deep in water. The twins looked around in horror as their grandmother's former home was destroyed.

"What have we done?!" Alex shouted.

"I've always wanted a pool, but this is ridiculous!" Conner yelled.

The water poured into the house faster and faster. The twins couldn't keep their feet on the floor anymore. They treaded water as it lifted them

toward the ceiling.

"We've got to swim out of here or we'll drown!" Conner said. *"Follow me!"*

He took a deep breath and dove underwater. Alex was quick to follow him. They swam across the cottage to the front door. There was an extremely strong current coming through the door, so the twins had to grab hold of anything they could to force themselves against it.

They pulled themselves past the front door and discovered the cottage was no longer in the mountains but in a large, murky body of water. It sank below them and disappeared into the dark, watery depths. The twins grabbed hold of each other and swam as hard as they could to the surface—*praying there would be a surface.*

Finally they saw a distorted night sky above them; *it was the surface!* The twins surfaced in the mysterious water, gasping for air. The air was freezing against their faces.

"What was *that* all about?!" Conner yelled.

Alex wasn't paying any attention to him. She saw large trees in the distance, with giant roots that sank into the ground. Fireflies filled the air and lily pads floated on the water around them. She knew exactly where they were.

"Conner!" Alex said and excitedly splashed her brother. *"We're in the Ugly Duckling Pond! We're here! We're back in the Land of Stories!"*

CHAPTER NINE

THE GATHERING IN THE WOODS

Alex and Conner slowly crawled out of the pond. They were soaked, muddy, and covered in lily pads. They shivered in the cool night air and held themselves tightly as they looked at the land around them.

The Ugly Duckling Pond was in the middle of a forest in the Northern Kingdom. The twins had passed it on their previous trip into the Land of Stories, but neither had expected to become so *acquainted* with it on their next visit.

"I cannot believe we just sank Grandma's house!" Conner said through chattering teeth. "It takes a lot of talent to submerge something that isn't even close to water!"

Bits and pieces of their grandmother's cottage were still floating in the pond. Her rocking chair bobbed up and down in the water. Alex was so amazed, she didn't even care how dirty or cold she was.

"I sure hope Grandma has really good house insurance—*Alex, are you even listening to me?"* Conner asked.

She turned to face him. The excitement was practically glowing in her eyes. She didn't care how they had gotten there; they were finally there and that's all that mattered.

"We're *here*.… We're actually *here*.…" Alex said. Even a trembling jaw couldn't take the smile off her face. Despite the circumstances, it was the first time Alex had been happy in months.

"Congratulations, you managed to successfully and dangerously transport us into the fairy-tale world… *again*," Conner said with a smile of his own. "I've got to say, I prefer Grandma's methods of transportation to yours."

Alex's smile disappeared as the reality of it set in. She surveyed the forest around the pond more closely. "Something's wrong," she said.

"Of course something is wrong!" Conner said. "Grandma's cottage is at the bottom of a pond! How are we going to explain that one to her?"

"That's not what I mean," Alex said. "Listen. Do you hear that?"

Conner raised his eyebrows and looked from side to side. The pond and the forest around it were dead silent.

“I don’t hear anything,” Conner said.

“Exactly,” Alex said. “We’re standing at the edge of a pond and there are no sounds at all—no frogs or crickets or anything.”

Conner nodded, understanding what she meant. It was so eerie he was surprised he hadn’t noticed it before. “It’s like everything is on mute,” he said.

“Or *hiding*,” Alex said.

Suddenly, on the other side of the pond, a dark figure emerged from the trees. It startled the twins at first until they saw it was small, barely the size of a dog. It was running very fast on four skinny legs and had something white trailing behind it.

Alex and Conner hid behind the closest tree and watched it from afar. The strange creature slowed into a fast and springy walk as it delicately approached the pond. It was wearing a dark cloak and lowered its hood with its front paws before taking a drink from the water.

The moonlight reflecting off the water illuminated the mysterious visitor, and the twins could make out what it was. It had dark red fur, pointy ears, and a long fluffy tail with a white tip.

“It’s a fox!” Conner whispered to Alex.

The fox jerked his head up from the water and his bright yellow eyes stared in their direction. He must have had impeccable hearing.

The twins stayed still. The fox headed for the trees, in the opposite direction from where he had come.

“Where is he going?” Alex whispered to her brother.

“Do I look like an expert in cloaked mammals?” Conner said. The fox disappeared into the trees, but besides being the only living thing they had seen, there was something very intriguing about him. Neither of the twins wanted to let him out of their sight. “We should follow him,” Conner said.

“Why?” Alex asked.

Conner shrugged. “Do we have another plan we’re supposed to be following?” he said.

“Good point,” Alex said. And without another moment to waste, the twins began chasing after the small fox, hoping he would lead them to someone or something that would help them find their mother.

Alex and Conner ran after the fox for a good while. He wasn’t sticking to a path, so it was hard to see him between the trees ahead. He was

incredibly fast for his size, too, so it was difficult to keep up with him. They were happy to run and warm their bodies, though. Their clothes began to dry the more they went.

"It looks like we're going into the Dwarf Forests," Alex whispered as she jogged.

"How can you tell?" Conner asked.

"The trees are getting thicker and it's getting harder to see the sky," Alex said. "Also, I'm feeling more anxious the farther we run—that's the biggest clue."

Conner gulped. The Dwarf Forests had never been a good place for the twins. The last time they had been in this part of the Land of Stories they had been chased by wolves and kidnapped by goblins.

The fox came into view ahead and the twins came to a belated stop, like cars with bad brakes. They hid behind the biggest tree they could find and each gestured for the other one to be quiet.

The fox was standing on his hind legs next to a stone well in the middle of a clearing. The moon illuminated the clearing like a spotlight. The fox stood very still, keeping a close watch on the trees around him. He was waiting, but for what the twins couldn't tell.

At one point the fox looked directly at the twins' hiding spot but didn't appear to see them. The twins wondered if they blended in with the rest of the forest because they were so dirty or just because it was so dark.

It was unnervingly quiet in the Dwarf Forests, too. It was surprising, since the twins had remembered hearing all kinds of troubling sounds coming from close by and afar the last time they were here.

A few twig snaps echoed into the night as someone or something made its way into the clearing. The fox jerked his head in the direction of the snaps and smiled, exposing several tiny sharp teeth. A sly expression came to his face—the twins couldn't tell if it was because he was pleased or just because he was a fox.

Three cloaked figures stepped into the clearing. They were all different shapes and sizes: One was enormous, another was only a little bigger than the twins, and the third was as tiny as the fox. A large raven swooped into the clearing, perching on the well next to the fox. It didn't need a cloak; its dark feathers were enough to camouflage it in the night.

The others surrounded the well, all facing the fox. The fox rubbed his small paws together. “So glad you all could make it,” the fox said through his toothy grin.

The smallest of the cloaked figures lowered its hood. He had shiny black eyes, white stripes, and a short snout. It was a badger, and a paranoid one at that.

“It isn’t safe for us to be out at night like this,” the badger said and nervously looked around. “At least not anymore.”

“Relax, Badger,” the fox said. “If the Enchantress wanted to harm us, we would be dead by now.”

“Get to the point, Fox,” the raven squawked impatiently. “Why did you call us here tonight?”

The largest figure lowered its hood; it was a gigantic brown bear. “And make it fast, I’ve got cubs at home,” the bear said with a booming and growly voice.

Alex and Conner had never seen so many talking animals in the same place. They hoped their presence would remain unnoticed.

“I’ve just returned from the Eastern Kingdom,” the fox said. “I heard the Enchantress did a number on it but I wanted to see it with my own two eyes. The whole place is a disaster; it’s covered in vines and thornbushes as far as the eye can see. It’s worse than I ever imagined—it’s as if the Thornbush Pit has taken over the entire kingdom!”

“Oh dear,” the badger squealed and began nervously tapping his paws together. “Is it going to cross into other kingdoms?”

“I hate thorns,” the raven said.

“That’s the thing,” the fox explained. “The plants grow perfectly along the border; they don’t cross into the Northern Kingdom at all. I even tried provoking a plant with a stick but it only coiled around the edge that touched Eastern Kingdom ground. It takes very powerful magic to be *that* specific.”

The animals exchanged worried expressions. The remaining hooded member of the group maintained his silence. Alex and Conner wondered what kind of creature was under the cloak.

“Why would the plants only stay in one kingdom?” the bear asked.

“I reckon the Enchantress is taking over the world in style,” the fox said. “She’s doing it one kingdom at a time, showing the world that the

Happily Ever After Assembly is no match for her. It's only a matter of time before she takes over the Dwarf Forests, too… and we must be prepared."

"But what would she want with the Dwarf Forests?" the badger asked, shaking his head. "It's full of nothing but criminals and outcasts like us."

The fox's grin grew bigger. "Exactly why I called you all here tonight," he said. "I think we should pledge our allegiance to the Enchantress now, before she strikes."

The animals grunted and growled their protest.

"You're out of your rabbit-preying mind, Fox!" the bear said.

"We're already fugitives!" the raven said. "You want us to get locked away in Pinocchio Prison next?"

The fox raised his paws at them, calming their nerves.

"Hear me out before you disregard me entirely," he said. "Think about it: The reason we live in these parts is because none of us could fit in a Happily Ever After Assembly–regulated society. The Enchantress is going to change all that; the world of fairies and man is over. If we show loyalty to her now, then when she takes over, *and she will take over*, she may spare us."

The fox was slowly starting to convince the animals. They all remained quiet except the badger.

"We can't do that!" the badger said. "It's already bad enough living in exile! Can you imagine what they'd do to us if we sided with *her*?!"

"That's where you're mistaken, Badger," the fox said. "You're still in the happily-ever-after frame of mind. I saw what the Enchantress is capable of. Trust me; all the fairies in the world aren't going to be able to stop her this time. If they could, they would have done so already."

The animals looked back and forth to one another. All were afraid to be the first to express their interest.

"How would we show our allegiance?" the bear asked.

"You're not agreeing with him, are you?" the badger asked the bear.

The bear growled restlessly. "We're already castaways—what more can they do to us?" he said. "If the world is changing, why not change with it? Especially if there's something in it for us."

The raven bobbed up and down, contemplating. "What's your plan, Fox?" she asked.

“I’ve been asking around; I’ve got some ideas,” the fox said. His mouth had dropped the smile but his eyes hadn’t.

“What about you?” the raven squawked in the direction of the unidentified creature. “You’ve been awfully quiet.”

“He’s always quiet,” the bear said. “I don’t even know if he can speak.”

The hooded creature looked around at his fellow animals and nodded his head. A simple and singular *ribbit* came from under his hood.

Alex and Conner both gasped. *Could it be?*

The badger must have heard the twins’ reaction because he grew more timid than ever before. “We should get out of here before we get caught.”

“Think it over!” the fox said. “You all know where to find me.”

All of the animals put their hoods back over their heads and disappeared into the night. The fox took one last look around the forest before following the others. Perhaps the badger’s paranoia had gotten to him.

The twins knew they wanted to follow the mysterious hooded creature. They made sure the other animals were a safe distance away, then bolted through the forest after their new target.

The forest became darker and darker as they went. The twins had been running for a few minutes, jumping over boulders and tree roots. They were cold, tired, and lost; it was almost nostalgic for them, reminding them of their last trip. But there was no sign of the hooded creature.

“I don’t get it,” Alex said. “He was *just* here.”

“It’s like he disappeared into thin-*AHHH* !” Conner screamed.

Alex turned to see what had startled her brother. Emerging from the trees directly behind them was the hooded creature. He was much taller and more menacing than he had looked in the clearing. He began slowly walking toward the twins. They clutched each other in fear.

“We’re sorry for following you!” Conner said. “We thought we might have known you.”

“We didn’t mean any harm!” Alex said. “We’ll leave you alone now!”

The creature kept coming toward them.

“You better get away from us!” Conner said, taking another approach. “My sister knows magic! She just sank a house—*she’ll mess you up*!”

Alex stared at her brother in disbelief. Did he think this was *helpful*?

The creature froze just a few feet away from them and looked the twins up and down and side to side.

Conner picked up a big stick on the ground and began swinging it in the hooded creature's direction.

"I played T-ball in elementary school!" he said. "I'm warning you!"

A soft chuckle came from under the creature's cloak.

"Come now, is that really how you're going to greet an old friend?" said a very familiar and proper voice. Its owner slowly removed his hood and the twins sighed with relief.

"*Froggy!*" the twins exclaimed. They jumped into a huge hug, violently embracing their old friend.

"Hello, Conner! Hello, Alex!" Froggy said and hugged them back. "I wish I could say it's a surprise seeing you two here, but you've always had a knack for being in danger."

Froggy was a tall, man-size frog with big bright eyes and a wide mouth. He always dressed to impress; the twins noticed he was wearing a three-piece suit under his cloak.

"It's so good to see you, Froggy!" Conner said.

"We've missed you so much," Alex said.

"And I've missed you," Froggy said as he leaned down to look them both in the eye. "You've both grown so much! You're practically grown-ups!" His expression fell once he remembered where this reunion was taking place. "What on earth are you two doing here at a time like this? Does your grandmother know where you are?"

Alex and Conner exchanged guilty glances at each other.

"Er… not really," Conner said.

"Grandma doesn't know *exactly* where we are," Alex said, not looking him in the eye.

"I should certainly hope not," Froggy said. "The Dwarf Forests are still too dangerous for you to be in, especially these days and especially this late."

Alex and Conner gave each other another glance.

"I recognize that look," Froggy said. "What aren't you telling me? And why are you both so filthy?"

Alex and Conner considered lying to him for a second, but they knew they couldn't.

“Our grandma doesn’t know we’re in this world,” Alex confessed.

Froggy’s wide mouth fell open and he stared blankly at the twins. “How did you get here?”

“Alex sank our grandma’s house—I wasn’t kidding,” Conner said. “That’s why we’re covered in swamp juice. It was horrifying and strangely awesome at the same time.”

“You sank a house?” Froggy asked, dumbfounded. “You know, normally I would question such a possibility, but I don’t with you two.”

“It was an accident!” Alex said. “I activated another one of my grandma’s portals.”

“Your technique needs work,” Conner said out of the side of his mouth.

Froggy looked around at the forest. They could tell knowing they had snuck into the fairy-tale world made him uneasy. “Children, you shouldn’t be here,” he said. “These are *very* dangerous times. An evil Enchantress is at large—”

“Ezmia,” Alex said. “We know all about her. She’s kidnapped our mom.”

“What?!” Froggy said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Not as sorry as we are,” Conner said. “And our grandma practically imprisoned us trying to stop us from coming here.”

“Clearly it worked,” Froggy said with an eye roll. “Has she *met* you two? Are you even capable of sitting still?”

“Thank you,” Conner said, glad of the validation.

“Wait,” Alex said, noticing something for the first time. “Froggy… you’re a *frog* again!”

“Oh yeah,” Conner said. “What gives?”

Despite his transformation back into Prince Charlie, the long-lost Charming prince, Alex and Conner still imagined him as a frog whenever they thought of him. They had to remind themselves it wasn’t his natural form.

“I’m undercover,” Froggy said. “Your grandmother transformed me back into a frog so I could keep a watch over the animals and criminals living in the Dwarf Forests during this crisis. We figured they’d trust me more as an amphibian. Some of them even remember me from when I was living here.”

“Are they really going to join the Enchantress?” Alex asked.

“I doubt it,” Froggy said. “These are just a bunch of crooks trying to make the current situation work for them. I wouldn’t worry too much about it. But still, the Happily Ever After Assembly wants to keep an eye on them just in case things change.” Froggy folded his arms and looked between the twins. “I’m sure they’d be much more interested in knowing what you two are up to.”

“Froggy, you can’t tell anyone we’re here,” Conner said. “They’ll send us back.”

“We can’t be stuck at home, not when we know our mom is in danger,” Alex said.

They both looked up at him with large, pleading eyes.

“Children, you know I care about you deeply but—” Froggy started but was interrupted.

“WE’RE NOT CHILDREN!” Conner shouted. “Everyone keeps calling us that and I’m sick of it! We shouldn’t have to prove ourselves after everything we’ve been through already. It’s not like we’re a couple of irresponsible kids sneaking into a party—we’re two *young adults* trying to save our *mother’s life*!”

“You can tell our grandmother if you have to,” Alex said. “She can lock us up at home all she wants, but we’ll just keep finding ways to get back here until our mom is safe.”

“We *have* to find her, Froggy,” Conner said. “We already lost our dad; we can’t lose our mom. We’re not going to stop until we save her.”

Froggy hopelessly looked back and forth between them with his big, glossy eyes. They had put him between a rock and a hard place.

“First things first,” Froggy said. “We need to get out of the Dwarf Forests before anything else sees you. Let’s get somewhere safe and we’ll discuss it further.”

Alex and Conner nodded, but they already knew there wouldn’t be anything to discuss. His loyalty to them was much stronger than it was to their grandmother—he was their friend before he was her subject. Froggy placed his cloak over the twins and led them safely through the forest.

Alex and Conner were so relieved to have miraculously made contact with an ally so soon, but they knew the worst was yet to come in the uncertain days ahead.

CHAPTER TEN

RUMPELSTILTSKIN'S DEBT

Pinocchio Prison was home to the most dangerous criminals in all the kingdoms. It was a tall, dark fortress that sat in the center of a long peninsula that curved around Mermaid Bay in the southern part of the Eastern Kingdom. It was perched at the top of a high and rocky cliff with sharp spikes pointing inward and outward at every window so there was no possible way to escape or gain unauthorized entry.

Enchanted wooden soldiers patrolled the narrow stone halls, keeping watch on the lawbreakers behind bars. The majority of those locked away were typical sheep-stealing ogres, kidnapping witches, and man-eating animals that had been caught before they fled into the Dwarf Forests.

The prison was also the home of a great mystery. During the one-hundred-year sleeping curse the Eastern Kingdom had endured, the prison had been the only place in the kingdom that had been spared; all the soldiers and inmates inside had strangely remained conscious while the rest of the country had slumbered.

More recently, the mystery had developed when the prison also became the only place in the kingdom not covered in the Enchantress's demonic thornbushes and vines.

Whether it was a fluke or a miracle was the question. Many assumed the prison was just too far removed to be affected by the curses. However, unbeknownst to all the soldiers and inmates inside, the prison's exclusion from the kingdom's greatest woes was due to a high-profile prisoner who resided on the thirteenth floor.

Rumpelstiltskin was serving his one hundred and twenty-seventh year behind bars. He was a very small man with large baggy eyes, a button nose, and short hair that clung to his head like a helmet. He wore a large collared shirt, tight pants on his tiny legs, and pointed red shoes that jingled when he walked.

After his infamous failed attempt to take the firstborn child of the Eastern Kingdom's former queen, Rumpelstiltskin went into hiding. But after a few years of being at large, the small man couldn't live with the guilt

of what he had almost done. So one hundred and twenty-seven years ago, he decided to turn himself in and had lived at Pinocchio Prison ever since.

Rumpelstiltskin had a tiny chamber all to himself. He had two barred windows, one on the heavy door of his cell and another on the wall facing Mermaid Bay. Both were too high for him to see out of unless he jumped, so the dark stones of his chamber floor and walls were all he had to look at every day.

His life had simplified greatly while in prison; he slept on a large stack of hay in the corner and ate on a tiny table pushed to the side with only one spoon and bowl in his possession. Although Rumpelstiltskin had many magical capabilities, he had decided to give them up when he went to prison, fearing magic would only lead him to trouble. He kept his quarters as simple as possible.

The first decade or so of imprisonment was incredibly lonely for the little man, but luckily for him, an unexpected roommate eventually moved in. One day a strong ocean breeze blew a seed into his chamber, and a week later a small daisy began to grow in between two rocks of the stone floor.

Rumpelstiltskin was amazed such a thing could happen. How could something so pleasant grow in such a miserable place? Of all the locations in the world, why did it decide to land here? He pondered the question for a great while, glad of something to distract him from his solitude and shame.

He ultimately decided the flower must have needed a friend as much as he did and that its presence in his cell had been purposeful. He took great care of the flower, impressively keeping it alive the entire time he had been in the prison. He shared his water with the daisy; he told it stories; and when it fell ill, he would stand on his tiptoes by the window with his spoon and reflect sunlight toward it until it regained its strength.

To the average person, having a flower as a companion may have seemed a little odd, but for Rumpelstiltskin, it was the best friend he had ever had.

The flower never *mocked* him for the clothes he wore like others had in his past. The flower never *judged* him for wanting the most out of life. The flower never *used* him for political gain. The flower never *condemned* him for the mistakes he made years before. The flower was only capable of doing one thing: sharing its beauty.

In a way, life in prison had been the best thing that ever happened to Rumpelstiltskin, giving him the most meaningful relationship he had ever had. However, his self-surrender hadn't only been a way for him to clear his conscience; it was also a way for him to protect himself from alliances he had made in his past. And unfortunately, after he'd spent so long hiding from his past, his past eventually found *him*.

It was just before sunset when a thunderous noise was heard outside the prison. It was an intense combination of snapping and crunching and popping that became louder and louder by the second.

The prison began to shake; his bowl and spoon rattled on his table. Whatever it was, it was getting closer.

Rumpelstiltskin jumped up and down at his window, trying to see what was causing the commotion. What he saw was the most terrifying sight he had seen in years. Like an enormous earthy stampede, a tsunami of angry thornbushes and vines traveled across the land, growing in the prison's direction.

"Oh no!" Rumpelstiltskin gasped. He clasped his hands around his mouth and looked around his cell. There was only one person capable of such magic, and after one hundred and twenty-seven years he knew she had finally come for him.

The wooden soldiers rushed through the halls in a panic.

"Thornbushes and vines are headed for the prison!" one shouted.

"Prepare for an attack!" another yelled.

Rumpelstiltskin looked down at the daisy; it was quivering. "There, there, little flower," he said and gently stroked one of its leaves. "Everything is going to be all right. I'm going to hide you."

He quickly retrieved his bowl off the table and covered his friend with it.

The prison was hit by the plants and the impact made the whole fortress sway. The thornbushes and vines crawled up the sides of the structure, wrapping around it like an army of serpents, until all the windows were covered and the prison went dim inside.

After a few quiet moments, a series of soft rumbles pulsed through the prison like a giant heartbeat. Each rumble was stronger than the next and came from several floors below Rumpelstiltskin's cell. Something was slowly making its way higher and higher through the prison.

Rumpelstiltskin could hear all the wooden soldiers from above rushing down to fight off whatever was intruding below. The clanking of their weapons echoed as they tried fighting it off. They were definitely fighting off more than just plants.

Finally, Rumpelstiltskin heard the battle reach the thirteenth floor. He was too scared to move. He smelled things burning and smoke started to flow into his cell from under his cell door. Each soldier's scream was followed by a loud thud as their wooden bodies hit the floor one by one.

Once all the soldiers were gone, a pair of soft footsteps came down the hall and stopped at Rumpelstiltskin's cell door. He was trembling, afraid these were his last moments alive.

A bright flash of violet light blasted the cell door into smithereens. Rumpelstiltskin braced himself and was pelted by its debris. Once the smoke from the blast cleared, he finally saw who had been causing all the chaos.

Standing in the doorway of his cell was a tall and beautiful woman. She had long magenta hair that floated and rippled above her like slow-moving flames. Her eyes were violet with long feathered eyelashes like moths' antennae. She wore a long purple gown with matching gloves and a high collar. A ghostly cape flowed around her and through the hall like a thick sheet of smoke.

"Ezmia?" Rumpelstiltskin said in horror.

The Enchantress's bright red lips curved into a smirk. "Hello, Rumpy," Ezmia said in her playful, airy voice. "How I've missed you."

Ezmia stepped into Rumpelstiltskin's cell and examined the small chamber. Vines and thornbushes followed her, growing around the walls of the cell, covering the inside of the prison as she traveled through it.

"I love what you've done with the place," Ezmia said sarcastically, passing the stack of hay he used as a bed. "It doesn't fit a man of your *exquisite taste*, though, does it? I can't imagine why you'd abandon me to spend thirteen decades in *here*."

Rumpelstiltskin remained very still, knowing it wasn't wise to make sudden movements around dangerous creatures.

"Have you come to kill me?" he said with a quivering jaw.

The Enchantress forced out a theatrical laugh that did little to comfort him. "Why would I want to kill my oldest *friend*?" she said with a

menacing smile. “Besides, if I wanted you dead I would have killed you ages ago.” Her smile faded and her violet eyes glared down at him. “Why else do you think I’ve spared you from all the curses I’ve cast over the kingdom so far?”

Rumpelstiltskin had always wondered if the exceptions were because of him.

“If you aren’t going to kill me, then what brings you here?” he asked, trembling even more. He was convinced she must have a fate worse than death planned for him.

“Look at you, Rumpy, you’re just as helpless as the day I found you,” Ezmia said pityingly. “When we met, you were just another miserable dwarf working in the mines. But I knew you and I were kindred spirits. We both wanted more than the world was offering us, and we both were ostracized because of it.”

“I never meant to anger you,” Rumpelstiltskin said and lowered his head. “I had to turn myself in—I couldn’t live with what I had done.”

“Or what you *failed* to do, that is,” Ezmia said. “But all is forgiven.”

Rumpelstiltskin knew her too well to believe her. Ezmia had something up her sleeve—she always did.

“What do you want from me?” he asked.

Ezmia went to the window. The vines and thornbushes covering the outside parted so she could see the view of the bay.

“Like it or not, we made a deal,” she said. “I’ve come back so you can finally fulfill your end of our bargain. I saved you from a melancholy life in the mines, I made you my apprentice and taught you magic, and all I ever asked in exchange was for your *assistance*.”

“You never said I would have to kidnap a child,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “And a *princess*, no less!”

“I made it incredibly easy for you,” Ezmia said sharply, her tone growing angry. “*I* bewitched the king into thinking he needed a wife who could spin hay into gold! *I* chose the village girl he ordered to do so! *I* planned the whole negotiation between the two of you! All *you* had to do was take the child that was owed to you!”

“You wanted me to do your dirty work,” Rumpelstiltskin peeped. “You wanted *my* name to be tarnished if anything went wrong.”

“Of course I did,” she said unapologetically. “I was still in the Happily Ever After Assembly at the time. I couldn’t get caught stealing an infant princess. As far as the fairies knew, I was still one of them.”

“As far as *I* knew, you were still one of them, too!” Rumpelstiltskin said. “I thought I was going to be the apprentice of a great fairy, not an Enchantress who was secretly plotting to take over the world.”

Ezmia took delight in remembering the deception. “Yes, *everyone* was surprised,” she said. “Of course, that all changed when the rest of the fairies found out you were working for me and I wasn’t invited to the child’s christening. I lost my temper and cursed the whole kingdom to die. They would have, too, if the Fairy Godmother hadn’t converted my curse into a pathetic *sleeping curse*.”

The Enchantress closed her eyes and massaged the side of her head. “And since then, Sleeping Beauty has been my own personal nightmare,” she said. “You should have seen her face when I attacked her in the forest, though. There she was, the martyr queen, trembling with fear.… It was *priceless*!”

Ezmia smiled to herself and let out a chuckle.

“You wanted me to kidnap her when she was a baby, then you cursed her for a hundred years, and now you’ve covered her kingdom in vines and thorns,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “Why do you hate Queen Sleeping Beauty so much?”

Ezmia glanced at him sideways as she contemplated her honest answer and the answer she would give him. Whatever she said, there was always much more she *wasn’t* saying.

“That’s where everyone gets it wrong,” Ezmia said. “I’ll admit I take great satisfaction in seeing the Eastern Kingdom in a state of turmoil. My reputation was bruised when my fatal spell was reduced into an *extensive nap*, so there is an element of revenge I take great pleasure in. But the reason I’ve attacked the Eastern Kingdom again has nothing to do with Queen Sleeping Beauty.”

“Then why are you causing all this chaos?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, nervously looking at the vines and thornbushes outside.

“Everything has its purpose,” Ezmia said with a proud and sinister gleam in her eyes. “It’s been so long since my last public appearance, the world thought I was dead. I needed to show them that I was back and more

powerful than ever. And when better than on a day they were celebrating the end of my last curse? It's *deliciously evil* of me, isn't it?"

Ezmia closed her eyes and a wide smile grew on her face.

"What part of our bargain do you want me to fulfill?" Rumpelstiltskin asked. "Surely you don't want me to kidnap Queen Sleeping Beauty now?"

"It was never Sleeping Beauty that I was after," Ezmia said and angrily paced around the chamber. " 'Sleeping Beauty this… Sleeping Beauty that…' She wouldn't even have that ridiculous name if it weren't for me!"

This puzzled Rumpelstiltskin even more. "Then what were you after?" he asked.

"I was after a *child*," Ezmia confessed. "A child of royal blood, specifically; it's one of the many things I need to complete a *special project* I've been working on."

"A special project?" he asked. "You mean taking over the world, I assume? That's what you've always wanted, isn't it?"

Ezmia looked him straight in the eyes. "*Something* like that," she said. "And it's a lot harder than it looks. Shortly before I met you I figured out a way to do it. It's an enchantment of sorts—it's a very complex formula that requires certain properties to be claimed and special assets to obtain. Once I manage to gather all of them together, not even the Fairy Godmother herself can stop me."

"It's been more than a century since I last saw you," Rumpelstiltskin said. "Why have you decided to strike now after all this time?"

Ezmia waved a hand and the stones in the floor rose to form a large chair.

"You haven't been around, Rumpy," Ezmia said and took a seat. "While you've been locked away, I have had *quite* the century. It's not as if I've been lying around this whole time. I've been betrayed, I've been poisoned, and I've come back from the verge of death stronger and more powerful than ever."

"Poisoned?" Rumpelstiltskin asked. "By whom?"

"Evly." Ezmia said the name as if it were a disease.

"Evly?" Rumpelstiltskin said. "Who is that?"

"She was supposed to be my solution," Ezmia said. "However, she ended up being my greatest disappointment."

She waved her hand again and stones in the floor formed a stool for Rumpelstiltskin to sit on.

"It's a long story, so have a seat," Ezmia ordered.

Rumpelstiltskin didn't argue.

"After I cursed the Eastern Kingdom, I went into hiding," Ezmia explained. "I may have been the most powerful fairy in the world, but I was no match for all the other fairies put together. I knew I couldn't strike again until I was further along with my *project*—until I was past the point of no return. So I plotted in secret, keeping a watchful eye on all the kingdoms for the pieces I needed to continue my work.

"I assembled a quaint little castle in the Northeast where no one could find me, and plotted out what my next move would be. But it required so many elements outside my reach, I knew I would have to be patient. I brought many troubled souls into the castle, hoping to produce a proper apprentice, but they all failed me—each being a bigger disappointment than the last.…

"Many years later, in the Charming Kingdom, when the late King Chester was just a prince, the palace had an unexpected visitor one night. A young maiden banged on the palace doors, seeking shelter from a horrible rainstorm. Chester instantly fell in love with her and asked his parents for permission to propose.

"Being the old-fashioned king and queen they were, Chester's parents said he could only marry the maiden if he could prove she was of royal blood. So the prince devised a plan to test the maiden's royal status; he made her a bed in the guest chambers with a stack of a dozen mattresses and placed a pea under the very bottom, convincing his parents that only a royal could feel the imperfection through the mattresses.

"The next morning the maiden complained about a restless night, and Chester was certain he had found his future wife. He asked for the maiden's hand in marriage but she refused his proposal. The maiden had a secret; she had tossed and turned with discomfort all night because she was *pregnant*, not because she was a princess.

"The maiden had been a simple peasant runaway, embarrassed to be with child out of wedlock. She disappeared from the palace as quickly as she came, and Prince Chester never saw her again. Naturally, when I heard about this so-called pregnant princess on the run, I was intrigued—knowing

I needed a royal child. I tracked her down in the forest, where she was living on her own in a cave.

“To my delight, she was very much with child when I discovered her. I made her an offer she couldn’t refuse; in exchange for her child I would give her a life of riches and luxury beyond her wildest dreams—*the usual*. She agreed and the deal was made. Unfortunately, she backed out of our agreement shortly before giving birth to the child. She ran into a neighboring village and died giving birth to a little girl, whom the villagers named Evly.

“I soon discovered that the maiden hadn’t been a royal and Evly couldn’t be the child I needed. I let the villagers raise her while I conceived *another* plan to get use out of Evly after all. I was going to train her to seduce and marry Prince White of the Northern Kingdom. Together they would produce an heir and I would finally have the child of royal blood that I desired.

“Unfortunately, when I returned for Evly in her adolescence, she had fallen madly in love with one of the village boys, a pathetic aspiring poet by the name of Mira. I took Evly to my castle in the Northeast to begin training, but all she did was cry and whine every day and night about how much she missed Mira. So I brought the boy to her, imprisoning him inside a Magic Mirror.

“I thought it had been a kind gesture on my part, but it only caused Evly to grow more spiteful. She conducted a plan of her own against me. She broke into my room of potions and concocted a poison so strong that when a few drops touched the ground outside her window, all the trees and plants for miles around were killed.

“Evly laced a small dagger with the poison and stabbed me with it. The poison almost killed me; I shriveled down to the state of a dying human —I lost all my power, all my beauty, and all hope that I would fulfill my plans for the future. I ran as far away as I could, fearing Evly would try to finish me off, but the stupid girl was so consumed with trying to free Mira she forgot all about me.

“An old witch named Hagatha found me in the woods, barely alive. She recognized me and the effects of the poison. She brought me to her small hut in the Dwarf Forests and nursed me back to health. I became her apprentice but she treated me horribly, taking advantage of the person I

once was. She sent me out on the most gruesome errands and forced me to sleep outside like an animal.

"Ironically, the poison is also what saved me. The Happily Ever After Assembly had been looking for me since I cursed the Eastern Kingdom; they didn't recognize me in my frail state and decided I was dead.

"But one day, a few decades later, Hagatha and I were collecting plants from the Thornbush Pit that she planted around her hut. She was forcing me to do all the work and my hands were scraped and scratched from all the thorns. I remember feeling more angry than I had ever felt in my life. I was furious that I, the woman who had once been more powerful than anyone else, had become a witch's slave.

"And with this anger I felt something different. Suddenly, I felt *alive* again—like a candle had been relit inside of me. After many long years, my body had finally recovered from the effects of the poison and my powers had come back.

"It's true what they say, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger; I'm living proof. I was more powerful than ever before. My powers were different, too; my magic had always come from a happily-ever-after source, coming from a life among fairies—that's why every curse I created could be broken with a kiss or token of affection—but not anymore. This time my magic had no limits.

"I pushed Hagatha into the pit and cursed the vines and thornbushes to trap anything that came close to it," Ezmia confessed.

"*You* pushed her into the Thornbush Pit?" Rumpelstiltskin asked. "All this time, that's been *your* magic festering in that godless place?"

"Indeed," the Enchantress said with a boastful shrug. "Believe me, I wanted to take the credit for it, but I still had work to do before I went public again. I returned to the castle and collected all my belongings, ready to complete what I had started so long ago.

"But I knew that I would have to continue being patient. The kingdoms were experiencing a golden age: Cinderella and Prince Charming were married; Sleeping Beauty had just awoken; Snow White was crowned Queen.… I knew if I waited until the right moment, my return would have a much bigger impact, and now it has."

Rumpelstiltskin feared what her newfound strength would mean for the future of the kingdoms. "I've never understood you," he said. "You used

to be so admired and loved by the whole world—why wasn't that enough? When did it all go wrong?"

The Enchantress looked to the floor with a snide expression. "People only love you as long as they're getting something out of you, but the minute you say something they don't want to hear or do something they don't want to see, all the admiration drains from their hearts."

"But why this obsession with power?" Rumpelstiltskin asked as cautiously as possible. "Why do you need the world, Ezmia?"

Ezmia let out a long sigh. "I have my reasons," she said sharply. "And quite frankly, I don't give a damn if you or anyone else understands."

A tension grew in the room, but it wasn't between Ezmia and Rumpelstiltskin; it was between Ezmia and the world.

"But where do I fit in?" Rumpelstiltskin asked. "If you're so powerful now, why do you need me?"

"Well, that's simple," Ezmia said. "Out of all my apprentices over the years, you have been the most loyal to me, Rumpy. You actually *started* what I asked of you, and now I'm going to let you finish it. Besides, it'll be nice to have a friend around once I take over."

They exchanged a weighty glance, both aware that this was nothing close to a friendship.

"There is another child, isn't there?" Rumpelstiltskin asked with a heavy heart, already knowing the answer. "You want me to kidnap another child."

"Precisely," the Enchantress said.

Rumpelstiltskin lowered his head and closed his eyes. He knew he wouldn't have a choice this time; refusal would mean death.

"Well, that's enough catching up for one day," Ezmia said and glided toward the door with a newfound spring in her step. "Come along, Rumpy. There is much work to be done. I've waited almost two centuries for this, so as you can imagine, I've grown very impatient."

The stones sank back into the ground and Rumpelstiltskin fell on his behind.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Hagatha's old hut," the Enchantress said. "It's where I've been spending most of my time since my castle was destroyed a year ago. You

should see what I've done with the place! A little magic goes a long way in the Dwarf Forests."

Rumpelstiltskin nostalgically looked around at his tiny cell; it had never seemed so much like home until he was being forced to leave it.

"I just have to say good-bye," Rumpelstiltskin said sadly.

Ezmia raised an eyebrow, not knowing who on earth he was talking about. Perhaps prison had been harder on her small friend than she'd imagined?

Rumpelstiltskin got on the floor and took the bowl off of the daisy. "I have to go now," he said, fighting back tears. "Please don't look at me like that. You'll be all right." He lightly stroked one of its white petals. "Good-bye, little flower. Please take care of yourself."

Rumpelstiltskin stood and walked through the doorway, leaving his cell for the first time in one hundred and twenty-seven years, but stepping into a world of even harsher imprisonment.

Ezmia lingered in the doorway, glaring down at the flower. She couldn't believe something so small and inferior could be so important… so protected… or so *loved*. It ignited a fire inside of her.

The Enchantress waved a hand in its direction and the daisy withered away, crumbling into bits of nothing. A smile appeared on her face—so satisfied to destroy something even so small.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE QUEEN AND THE FROG

It was the final moments before dawn, and the stars were slowly fading away as the sky began to brighten. Froggy and the twins had been traveling through the Dwarf Forests for the majority of the night, covering ground as quickly and quietly as possible.

Even after all they had been through together, the twins had never seen Froggy so tense. He constantly watched the path ahead and glanced behind them every few steps to make sure they weren't being followed.

"You seem stressed, dude," Conner said, looking up at his green friend.

"These times are definitely worthy of concern," Froggy said. "By the way, what's a 'dude'?"

Conner shrugged. "It's lingo from our world, nothing important," he said. "Sorry, I forgot where I was for a second."

Alex moved closer to Froggy as they walked, keen to have a more serious conversation. "How bad is it really?" she asked. "We've only heard from those animals in the forest and Mother Goose. What's your take on it?"

Froggy sighed. "I can't recall a time that's been so troubling," he said. "Even when the Evil Queen was at large, people went on with their lives. Now that the Enchantress is back, it's as if the world has stopped. Everyone stays indoors, too afraid to come outside until the Happily Ever After Assembly can do something."

"And have they done anything?" Conner asked. "Have they figured out any way to stop her?"

"I'm afraid not," Froggy said. "They tried unenchanting the plants covering the Eastern Kingdom, but it was no use—the magic is too strong. Ezmia has grown more powerful than anyone ever thought possible."

"Besides covering the Eastern Kingdom in plants, has the Enchantress attacked anything else?" Alex asked.

"That's all for now," Froggy said. "Which means she's likely to strike again at any moment."

"Why is everyone calling it the Eastern Kingdom now?" Conner asked. "Did I miss something? What happened to the Sleeping Kingdom?"

“Because the kingdom had finally been restored to its former glory before the sleeping curse,” Froggy explained. “Queen Sleeping Beauty wanted to celebrate the kingdom’s restoration by reclaiming its former title. They were having a huge celebration on the night the Enchantress attacked. Those poor people, they weren’t even expecting it.”

“I wonder if my rubber-band trick helped,” Conner said to himself.

“Why has Ezmia covered the kingdom in plants of all things?” Alex asked. “If the Happily Ever After Assembly can’t stop her magic anymore, why not curse Sleeping Beauty to die again?”

Like everyone else in the fairy-tale world, Froggy could only guess. “The symbolism, I’m assuming,” Froggy said and rubbed his tired eyes. “During the sleeping curse, the entire kingdom was covered in thornbushes and vines because no one was taking care of the grounds. I’m sure Ezmia is taking pleasure in seeing all their hard work go to waste by covering it again. She’s getting more use out of hostages than casualties—making people suffer is crueler than killing them, if you ask me.”

Alex and Conner were a tiny bit relieved to hear this. If hostages were what the Enchantress was collecting, then maybe their mom’s life wasn’t in jeopardy. They just hoped she wasn’t suffering.

“And now the plants are keeping people prisoner there, just like in the Thornbush Pit,” Alex said to herself, trying to make sense of it all.

“Exactly,” Froggy said. “Although no one has been able to make a connection between the two.”

“What about Queen Sleeping Beauty and King Chase? Are they all right?” Alex asked.

“King Chase is still stuck in the Eastern Kingdom as far as anyone knows,” Froggy said. “Queen Sleeping Beauty barely made it out. She was attacked while making a run for the border. All of her soldiers were killed, but she survived, thankfully. Soldiers from the Charming Kingdom found her in the forest and brought her back to the Charming Palace.”

“That’s horrible,” Alex said with a sigh. “Even though she took our mom, after what we learned about the Evil Queen I’m trying to come up with a reason the Enchantress may just be misunderstood, too. But it’s difficult.”

Conner grunted. “Not for me,” he said. “I don’t care what her excuse is—if she hurts Mom in any way, I’ll make sure it’s the last thing she does.”

The sun started to rise and the land around them became more visible. In the distance the twins were taken back to see a familiar wall made of gray brick that stretched across the entire horizon.

“Isn’t that the wall surrounding the Red Riding Hood Kingdom?” Alex asked.

“Oh yeah,” Conner said, recognizing it, too. “Wait—why are we headed there? I thought you were taking us back to your place, Froggy?”

“I am,” Froggy reassured.

“What happened to your hole in the ground?” Conner asked.

“I moved,” Froggy said. “I live in the castle now… with Queen Red.”

Froggy blushed a shade of dark green and went silent. Alex and Conner looked at each other with *did you just hear that?* written on their faces. Froggy walked ahead of them, crossing through the western gate of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom’s famous wall.

“Good morning, fellas!” Froggy said with a nod to the guards monitoring the gate.

“Morning, sir,” they said back, bowing slightly as he walked past them.

The twins ran through the gate and caught up with Froggy on the other side.

“Wait a minute,” Conner said with a laugh. “You’re living with Red? Are you guys like a couple or something?”

Froggy turned even darker green. “Well, I suppose so,” he said, too bashful to look them in the eye.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Alex said with raised eyebrows.

“How the heck did that happen?” Conner asked, with a confused grin on his face. “I mean, you’re so worldly and she’s so… *not*.”

“Conner, don’t be rude!” Alex said and nudged him.

“No, it’s quite all right,” Froggy said. “It’s very simple how it all happened. Shortly after I was transformed back into a human by your grandmother, and her castle was rebuilt from the fire, Queen Red invited me over for some tea one afternoon. She wanted to thank me again for saving her life during the battle against the Evil Queen and the Big Bad Wolf Pack. It was only supposed to last an hour or so, but we ended up talking all day —well, she talked and I listened—but we really connected. And since then our friendship has taken a more romantic turn.”

Their mouths hung wide open, not helping Froggy in the slightest.

“And how does she feel about you being in your frog form again?” Alex asked.

“It was challenging at first—she was afraid to touch me and wouldn’t let me sit on the furniture—but she’s come a long way and knows it’s for the greater good, even if it does put a pause in our relationship for now,” Froggy said. “Red’s really an exceptional woman; you just have to get to know her.”

“Is she still hung up on Jack?” Conner asked. Alex gave him a dirty look.

The dark green coloring faded from Froggy’s face. “We’re working on that,” he said. “I don’t think anyone can ever *stop* loving someone entirely. Sometimes love turns to hate, but I’m not sure it’s possible to ever stop *feeling* for them. Despite whatever feelings she has left over for Jack, I have no doubts about her affection toward me.”

Froggy smiled and nodded to himself. Alex and Conner shrugged to each other. Relationships always seemed complicated to them, but they seemed almost impossible to understand under these circumstances.

“Does it bother you, though?” Alex asked. “Knowing how much she cared about someone else in the past?”

Froggy shook his head confidently. “I figure if Red is willing to accept me, flawed and frogged, then I can do the same for her regardless of what baggage she brings,” he said. “And in time, the longer Jack and Goldilocks are out of the picture, the better it will be for her. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“Uh-huh,” Conner said with a snort, looking at him through the corner of his eye. “Whatever happened to Jack and Goldilocks? Has anyone heard from them?”

“Very little, actually,” Froggy said. “Occasionally they’ll be spotted on the outskirts of the kingdom and a villager will alert the castle guards, but they’ve kept pretty quiet, and for my and Red’s sake, I’m not complaining.”

The twins were happy to hear Jack and Goldilocks were still together and on the run, relieved that at least something had stayed constant while the rest of the world was in chaos.

They walked through the rolling hills of Bo Peep Family Farms and soon reached the picturesque town in the center of the kingdom. The twins were delighted to see all the dainty cottage homes and brick buildings with

pointed hay roofs again. They smiled at seeing Henny Penny Bank, the Shoe Inn, and shops like Pat-a-Cake Bakery and Jack Horner's Pie Shop all exactly the same as their last visit.

One thing was visibly different. The town that had once been full of farmers and shepherds hauling their livestock around was deserted.

"It's so empty," Alex said.

"Remember how crowded the town was last time?" Conner said. "It was like Take Your Goat to Work Day or something if I remember correctly."

Froggy let out a sad sigh. "It's a sign of the times, I'm afraid," he said. "It's like this in all the villages in all the kingdoms. No one leaves their home unless it's absolutely necessary."

They walked through the park in the center of the town and were pleased to see the Humpty Dumpty and the Little Boy Who Cried Wolf memorials and Jack and Jill Hill. The twins couldn't help but look at them a little differently, though, considering the information they had learned from Mother Goose.

"Whoa," Conner said, looking across the park. "Check out the renovation."

At the edge of the park, facing the twins, was Red Riding Hood's castle—her *new* castle. It stood twice as tall and sat twice as wide as the previous one. It had several towers, each higher than the next, a large dome in the center, and a gigantic clock just above the newly built front steps.

Alex and Conner both tilted their heads and squinted at the new castle; there was something rather peculiar about it.

"Looks familiar," Alex said.

"Sure does," Conner said. "It almost looks like all the other castles and palaces mixed together, doesn't it?"

"Just wait until you see the inside," Froggy said. "Red built me my very own library! It's just splendid! Hundreds and hundreds of books and they're all mine."

"That's wonderful!" Alex said, sharing his enthusiastic smile.

"Don't worry," Froggy said. "I kept all the books you gave me. They have their own special section."

He winked at her and Alex grinned. She remembered the books they had bonded over the first time they met.

The trio made their way up the castle's front steps and two guards opened the impressively large red doors for them to enter.

"Good morning, sir," the guards said to Froggy and bowed like the previous set of guards had.

"Morning, gentlemen," Froggy said.

"Does every guard know you or something?" Conner asked him.

"Well, I'm not exactly easy to forget," Froggy said. "I don't fit in around here, looking like this. I'm just glad the villagers stopped fainting when they see me… most of them, at least."

They took their first steps into the castle and the twins gasped. There was a marble floor under their feet, golden pillars to their sides, and an enormous grand staircase in front of them. And to no one's surprise, every wall was covered in a portrait of Queen Red in different glamorized positions.

"She certainly spared no expense," Conner said, eyeing everything around him. He looked down at the floor and noticed tiny basket-shaped tiles connecting the corners of the marble tiles.

"It sort of reminds me of Cinderella's ballroom," Alex said. "Except Red-ified."

A short and plump handmaiden was descending the stairs with an empty tea tray. Her cheeks were pink and she was wheezing from the effort. Alex and Conner hid behind Froggy, remembering that their last encounter with her hadn't been a pleasant one.

"Welcome back, Prince Charlie," the handmaiden called out to Froggy. It was strange for the twins to hear him addressed by his real name. "The queen is in the library; I just served her some breakfast."

"Thank you, I'm headed there now," he called back to her.

"Would you like me to bring you up some lily-pad tea?"

"That would be wonderful, thank you. Three flies in mine, please. Would you like any tea, Alex? Conner?"

"Sure, what the heck?" Conner said. "It wouldn't be a visit without some lily-pad tea."

The twins followed Froggy up the stairs, passing the handmaiden, who stopped in her tracks and stared at them peculiarly, not being able to recall exactly where she knew them from, but clearly remembering that it hadn't been a good experience.

They reached the top of the stairs, made a right, and traveled down another impeccably decorated hallway also lined with portraits of Queen Red. They found a pair of golden doors with *Library, Place of Books* carved into the wall above it.

Conner pointed out the carving to his sister. “I bet you anything it’s so she doesn’t forget what’s inside!” he quietly snickered into her ear.

“Here we are!” Froggy said and pushed open the doors.

The twins stepped inside and were awestruck once again. It was the most elegant library they had ever seen, beating even the one in Snow White’s palace. Alex almost teared up; Conner nodded with raised eyebrows.

“It’s beautiful!” Alex said and placed a hand over her heart.

“Not bad,” Conner said.

Shelves stretched to the tops of the very high ceiling, with ladders and balconies on various levels. A group of armchairs and sofas was placed in the center of the room near a large fireplace with a gigantic wolfskin rug (that had once been the Big Bad Wolf himself) spread across the floor in front of it. A beautiful chandelier hung in the center of the room, giving an abundance of light perfect for reading.

There were many portraits of Queen Red hung around the library, but an especially large painting was hung over the fireplace of Red reading a book in one of the armchairs. The twins had to do a double take, because just below the portrait was the real Queen Red Riding Hood seated in an armchair reading a book in the identical position as in the portrait.

She looked up as soon as she heard the doors open. *“You’re back!”* Red said when she saw Froggy. She tossed aside the book, which was thin and mostly pictures, and ran to her beau. They collided into a giant embrace.

Queen Red Riding Hood was a beautiful young woman with blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She was always dressed to the nines in red gowns and a hooded cape, but the twins noticed something different about Red. She wasn’t wearing nearly as much makeup or jewelry as she had been before. Perhaps her relationship with Froggy had simplified the young queen’s need to impress.

Froggy tried kissing her but Red pulled away. “No kisses, remember?” Red said. “I love you to death, darling, but I just find you repulsive at the

moment. There's nothing worse than a cold and clammy kiss—*you two*!"

Red's full attention was diverted to the twins once she spotted them. She stared at them as if Froggy had brought a poisonous snake into the castle.

"Red, do you remember Alex and Conner?" Froggy asked.

"*Remember?* How could I *forget*?" Red said, not looking away from them.

"Hi, Red," Alex said politely.

"How's it going?" Conner said nicely.

"Forgive me, I don't mean to be rude," Red said to the twins. "It's just every time I see you two I'm heartbroken, kidnapped, or homeless."

The twins couldn't argue. She was right.

"No worries," Conner said.

Red eyed them nervously for a minute before saying anything else. "So what brings you back to this world?" she asked. "Vacation? Visiting your grandmother?"

"Not exactly," Alex said.

"We were lost in the woods," Conner said. "Surprise, surprise."

"Thank goodness we saw Froggy in the forest, otherwise who knows where we would have ended up," Alex added.

Red glanced back and forth between them and then to Froggy. "So you brought them *here*?" she said through a forced smile. *"Lovely."*

"They had nowhere else to go," Froggy said. "I couldn't let them wander around alone at a time like this."

Red looked back at the twins, still anxious. "No, I suppose not," she said.

The twins tried to break the awkward tension. "Your new castle is beautiful," Alex said.

"I feel so at home—at *many* homes, actually," Conner said. "Was there a theme you were going for?"

"*Inspiration*, mostly," Red said blankly.

"Ah," Conner said. "Well, it certainly feels… *inspired*."

The handmaiden knocked on the door and entered the library carrying tea for Froggy and the twins.

"Oh, wonderful, why don't we catch up over some tea," Red said. Her tone didn't match her enthusiastic words.

The handmaiden set the tea tray down on a table by the armchairs and left the room. The twins took a seat across from Froggy and Red and the impromptu tea party began. Froggy held Red's hand lovingly.

"Is this all right?" Froggy asked her.

"Of course it is; I'm wearing gloves," Red said.

It was silent for a couple of moments, with only the sounds of their spoons clanking against their teacups filling the awkward tension in the room.

"So how old are you two now?" Red asked. "You look like you've grown."

"We're thirteen," Conner said.

"Oh, that's nice," Red said. "That's how old I was when I was elected queen. Of course, I had my granny to help me."

"How is your granny?" Alex asked.

"Retired, actually," Red said. "She lives at the Shoe Inn now. So I've taken over all responsibilities as queen."

"How's queenship treating you?" Conner asked. He sipped his lily-pad tea and then spit it out immediately.

"It's been difficult," Red said. "There's much more to being a queen than people realize—it's not all about jewels, fabulous dresses, and an abundance of affection. There are lots of decisions to be made every day about peasants and farmers and their needs and whatnot. Luckily I've had Charlie to help me."

"That's nice," Alex said. "Have you passed any new laws or anything worth mentioning recently?"

Red looked up at the ceiling trying to recall what her latest act as queen had been. "I raised taxes," she said happily, but then her smile faded into a frown. "But the people didn't like that at all so I quickly lowered them—my mistake, didn't realize they would take it so personally. Apparently my kingdom has a strong ecology, so there was no need to anyway."

"A strong *economy*, dear," Froggy corrected her.

"Oh yes, *economy*, forgive me," Red said. "We grow so much food and produce so much wool that our trades are very strong with the other kingdoms. The Red Riding Hood Kingdom is the breadbasket of this world, no pun intended."

The twins politely nodded along but were in shock someone like Red was still allowed to lead a kingdom. Froggy decided to save the twins from the conversation and escorted them to the corner of the room.

“I want to show you something special,” Froggy said and pointed to a special shelf where all of Alex’s old books were kept. “Here’s where I keep all of your books, Alex.”

“They look very happy there,” she said with a smile. Her eyes fell on the titles of the books just below them.

“Around the World in Eighty Days, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Frankenstein…”* She discovered with delight. “Froggy, these are all the classics from our world! Where did you get all of them?”

“Your grandmother, actually,” Froggy said. “She wanted to thank me again for helping you the last time you were here. I must say, the people in your world definitely know how to tell stories!”

Alex smiled at the thought, knowing most of the authors of her world had been inspired by the stories of his world.

“I’ve read a few myself,” Red said, trying to stay relevant in the room. “What’s that heavy one that I enjoy so much, Charlie? With that funny little language? *The Complete Works of Shakeyfruit*, was it?”

“*The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, my dear,” Froggy corrected her.

“Oh yes, that’s the one!” Red said. “It was a lovely read—one story is so pleasant and then the next is so tragic—took me nearly a year to get through them all. I hope he’s still writing in your world; he has a lot of potential, if you ask me.”

Conner laughed but made it look like a sneeze. “Don’t worry, he’s around,” Conner said. He wondered what Shakespeare would have thought about Red’s endorsement.

Alex was looking through all the other books in the library. Some of the titles that caught her eye were *Royal Romances Through the Ages*, *History of the Age of Magic*, *Mammals of the Northern Kingdom*, and *The Extinction of Dragons*. She knew she could easily spend a month in Froggy’s library reading everything in it.

“Look at this one,” Froggy said, pulling a book from a high shelf. “I think you two would appreciate it.”

He handed it to the twins and they read the title together. It had a dark red cover and illustrations pasted on pages inside.

"*Myths, Legends, and Collecting Spells*," Alex read with surprise. "Is it about the Wishing Spell?"

"That and many others," Froggy said. "There are all kinds of gathering folklores in there. I had no idea there were so many, but who knows which ones are real and which are not?"

They flipped through the pages, skimming past chapters about various legends of the fairy-tale world. A few caught their eye as they searched: The Sorcerer's Sword was a weapon believed to have gone missing during the Dragon Age and allegedly could cut through anything. The Wand of Wonderment was a magic wand built from the most treasured items of the most hated people in the world and made whoever possessed it invincible. The Vanity Crown was made of the most valuable jewels in all the kingdoms and was rumored to transform whoever wore it into the most attractive person alive.

They came across a section devoted to the Wishing Spell, and Alex read aloud as Conner followed.

> *The Wishing Spell is a legendary spell, mostly told to children to inspire a work ethic, that grants one wish to whoever collects a series of special objects. Several people have died trying to test the theory of the Wishing Spell, but due to all that is unknown about the spell, it is highly unlikely that the spell exists, and it is thought to be only a childish story.*

"If I had a nickel for every time we proved a childish story was true…" Conner said under his breath.

There was a knock on the door and the handmaiden poked her head inside the library.

"A message from the Charming Kingdom has just arrived for you, Your Majesty," she said.

"Oh?" Red asked. "Let's see it."

The handmaiden walked in and handed Red the letter. It was in a white envelope that had a golden glass slipper wax seal on the back.

"I wonder what this is about," Red said as she opened it. "I doubt Chance and Cinderella are throwing a ball at a time like this." She read the

letter and her eyes grew wide. She placed a hand over her mouth. “Oh my…” she said.

“What is it, my dear?” Froggy asked.

“Pinocchio Prison has been attacked by the Enchantress,” Red said, looking up from the envelope. “The Charmings are hosting a meeting for the Happily Ever After Assembly.”

Red handed him the envelope and Froggy read with the twins looking over his shoulder.

To Her Majesty, Queen Red Riding Hood,

We regretfully inform you that late yesterday evening, the Enchantress attacked Pinocchio Prison, consuming it with her enchanted plants. There is still no word of any survivors.

Your presence is requested tomorrow evening at the Charming Palace, where a meeting will be held with all heads of state and the Happily Ever After Assembly to discuss the current situation. Your attendance will be expected unless other word is received.

Sincerely,
Their Royal Majesties,
King Chance and Queen Cinderella

Red sighed and nodded her head. “I’ll need to leave at once,” Red told the handmaiden. “Please prepare a carriage for us to travel in and another carriage for my overnight luggage.”

The handmaiden nodded and hurried out of the library with her instructions. Alex and Conner looked to each other, knowing they were thinking the same thing.

“We have to go to this meeting, Froggy,” Alex said. “We have to know what’s going on.”

“And why is that?” Red asked.

“The Enchantress has our mother,” Conner said. “We need to figure out a way to save her.”

“Well, what does your grandmother say?” Red asked.

Alex and Conner looked at each other cautiously, wanting to break the news to Red gently.

“She doesn’t even know we’re here,” Conner said.

“She doesn’t want us to know anything,” Alex said.

Red cocked her head sideways and glared at Froggy. “Hold on a second,” she said. “Are you telling me the Fairy Godmother’s runaway grandchildren are hiding in *my castle*?!”

Froggy turned a shade of light green. “Like I said… I couldn’t leave them wandering alone in the forest,” he said with an apologetic laugh.

Red turned the same color as her clothing. “*Do you know how much trouble we could get into if the Fairy Council finds them here?!”* Red yelled.

“It doesn’t matter, because no one is going to tell her where we are,” Conner said sternly.

“Excuse me, but who died and elected you my successor?” Red said. “I should have you both thrown out of here!”

Conner raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms. “But you won’t,” he said snidely. “Because you know what’s worse than *involuntarily housing* the Fairy Godmother’s runaway grandchildren? *Voluntarily kicking out* the Fairy Godmother’s runaway grandchildren!”

Red made a couple high-pitched grunts as she looked between the twins and Froggy. She hated being compromised in her own home.

“How are you going to get inside that meeting?” Froggy asked the twins. “It’s for the heads of state only—it’s very exclusive. Besides, your grandmother is going to be there. How would you hide from her?”

Alex sighed, thinking of how they were going to pull it off.

“We’ll need to hide in something,” she said. “Something large enough to fit both of us inside it, but not suspicious looking.”

Conner’s eyes lit up and he looked around the room, searching for something he had seen when they came in. He walked across the room and pulled a portrait of Red off of the wall and brought it to her.

“Hey, Red,” Conner said, “do you still have this dress?”

Alex and Froggy walked to Red’s chair to take a look at what he was referring to. In the portrait, Red was wearing an enormous ball gown that protruded from her waist and flowed to the floor.

“I believe so, actually,” Red said. “It was one of the only dresses that was saved in the fire—*wait a second, you’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking, are you*?”

Conner looked up at Froggy and his sister with a giant smirk on his face. It didn't take them long to figure out what he was planning, and once they did, matching grins appeared on their faces.

"It's perfect!" Alex said.

"I have to admit, it's very clever," Froggy said.

Red was appalled.

"Have you all gone mad?" Red said. "You expect me to waltz into a meeting with the Happily Ever After Assembly with two brats under my dress? Absolutely not! I will not have any part in this whatsoever."

Alex and Conner looked to each other and their grins disappeared. Each gestured for the other to do or say something to convince her.

"Red," Alex said, leaning down by her side. "Our mom is in danger. We need to know what's going on so we can figure out a way to save her."

Conner leaned down on Red's other side, taking his sister's lead.

"She's all we have, Red," Conner said. "If anything happens to her, we'll be orphans."

Red was accosted by their pleading faces. She knew she couldn't say no to that—even *she* wasn't that selfish.

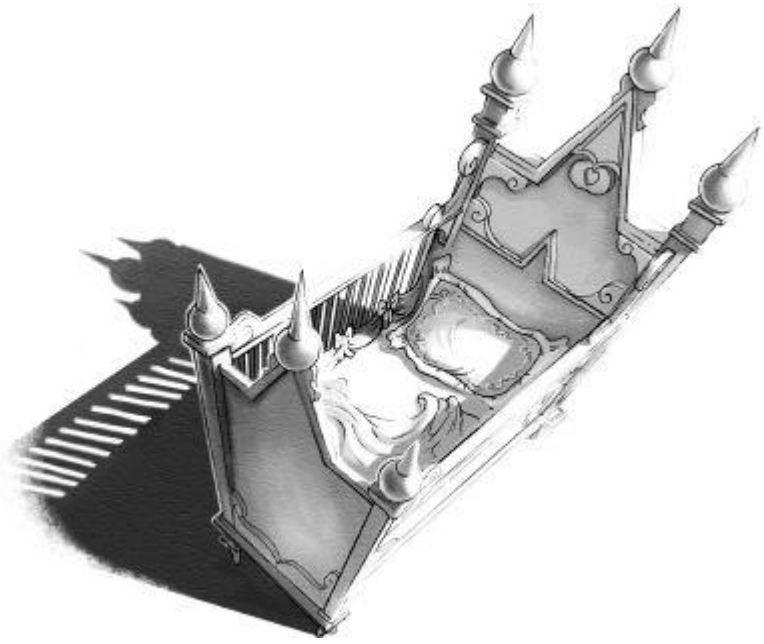
"All right, all right, all right!" Red said. "I'll help you out this one time, but after this, I'm done!"

Large smiles appeared on the twins' faces. Red rubbed the sides of her head, wondering how on earth she had gotten so involved so easily—it had been such a quiet day until the twins showed up.

"Thanks, Red," Alex said.

"You won't regret it," Conner added.

Red sank into her chair. "Can I get that in writing?" she asked.



CHAPTER TWELVE

A NOT-SO-CHARMING EVENING

The twins left with Froggy and Red shortly after receiving the letter about the Happily Ever After Assembly. The four of them rode in one carriage while all of Red's "necessary" luggage was carried in a separate carriage behind them. The twins felt sorry for the horses pulling the second carriage—it seemed like a heavy heave.

They had half a dozen soldiers surrounding them as they traveled, which Froggy insisted was the perfect amount for safety but not enough to cause any unwanted attention.

Halfway there they came to a stop so Red could change into the enormous gown their scheme required. They pulled into a tiny field between two large oak trees and Red transformed the first carriage into a dressing room. She kicked Conner and Froggy out and made Alex stay inside to help her dress.

It was definitely a challenge, as the gown was much bigger than the inside of the carriage.

"I'd just like to point out that Queen Snow White never has to change on the side of the road," Red said, struggling to pull the heavy dress over her head. "I suppose that's what I get for being an *elected queen*."

"It must be some consolation to know you were *wanted*," Alex said, trying to help Red move through the dress. "They actually *chose* you to lead their kingdom. It wasn't just handed to you."

"Not really," Red said. "After the C.R.A.W.L. revolution, it was between me and the *third* Little Pig—and he didn't even want the job. He was a total recluse. He barely came out of that brick house he was so proud of."

And with one last effort, Red pushed herself up through the center of the gown.

"There we go!" she said, out of breath.

The boys rejoined them inside the carriage and the procession continued to the Charming Palace. There was physically no room for anything else inside the carriage with the four bodies and the mound of endless red fabric crammed inside.

“Oh no,” Red said after they had been on the move for less than five minutes.

“What is it?” Conner asked with his face pressed against the window.

“Now I have to tinkle,” Red peeped. Everyone else in the carriage groaned.

The following evening, Queen Red’s party arrived at the Charming Palace. The twins couldn’t resist ogling all the storybook estates and villages they passed on the way to the palace’s front steps.

Something seemed different about the Charming Kingdom, though the twins couldn’t put their finger on it. Even beyond the lack of villagers parading through the streets and trading in the shops, there was a very gloomy vibe that floated through the whole kingdom.

The carriages rolled up to the bottom of the lengthy staircase leading up to the palace’s entrance, and the twins were relieved to finally be getting out of the compact carriage—they didn’t care how crammed they would be under Red’s dress.

They were greeted by a palace footman. Froggy immediately jumped out of the carriage and busied him with unloading the luggage in the second carriage.

The twins both hopped out of the carriage and crouched on the ground. Red was next to hop out and landed directly in the middle of them. Her gown exploded out of the carriage and securely covered the twins below her. *It was perfect!*

“So far so good,” Alex whispered under Red’s dress.

“Nice bloomers, Red,” Conner said, chuckling about the knee-length undershorts she had strategically put on.

Red grunted and kneed Alex in the head.

“Ouch! That was me, Red!” Alex said.

“Apologies,” Red said and then kneed Conner in the head.

“Ouch!” Conner yelled.

Froggy walked back to find Red and the twins perfectly in position. “Are we ready for this?” Froggy asked.

“I think so,” Alex said.

“Roger, Roger!” Conner said.

“That’s reassuring,” Froggy said and used a handkerchief to wipe the beads of sweat on his forehead. “Because *I* most certainly am not.”

“Take a chill pill, Frog,” Conner said. “No one is gonna know we’re under here.”

The footman glanced over suspiciously from the second carriage, positive he had just heard voices come from bodies that weren’t visible.

“Make sure you two stay as silent as possible under there,” Froggy said and gulped so hard he croaked. “Let’s make our way into the palace, shall we?”

Red took a step forward the twins weren’t ready for.

“Red, we can’t see anything; you’re going to have to guide us,” Conner whispered up at her.

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Red whispered down at them.

“Narrate what you’re doing,” Alex said.

Red closed her eyes and took a deep breath, mentally preparing herself for the evening she was in for.

“Fine, I’m *walking* toward the stairs,” Red informed them, and they moved with her. She was walking too fast for them to keep up.

“Take baby steps,” Conner whispered. “We’re crouched down here like chimpanzees.”

Red’s nostrils flared. “Sure,” she said sharply. “Now I’m walking *slowly* up the stairs.”

The first few steps were a disaster—Froggy kept gasping every time he saw one of their sneakers peeking out from under the gown. Slowly but surely, they managed to get the hang of it, and smoothly made their way up the enormous flight of steps.

Back at the carriages, the footman could have sworn he saw three pairs of feet under Red’s dress out of the corner of his eye. But when he double-checked, they were gone. The footman continued unloading the second carriage, deciding he just needed glasses—or to retire.

Alex’s and Conner’s backs were starting to ache from crawling up the steps like monkeys, but it only got worse when they reached the top of the stairs and the ground became flat, causing them to slouch even more.

“And now I’m walking toward the palace entrance, no more steps,” Red said out loud.

A few of the Charming Kingdom guards patrolling the entrance looked at her funny. After all, she was walking at a snail’s pace and talking to herself.

“You certainly are!” Froggy said to Red and patted her back, trying to reduce the awkwardness.

“Prince Charlie, welcome back, sir,” the twins heard a familiar voice say.

“Sir Lampton,” Froggy clarified for them. “Good to see you, although I wish the visit were for a different occasion.”

Alex and Conner tensed up knowing Sir Lampton was just a few feet away from them. They held their breath, afraid he’d hear even that.

“Now I’m *walking* inside the Charming Palace,” Red said to the twins, but was caught by Sir Lampton. “Um… *and I can’t believe it*! Feels like I was home just a minute ago—such a quick trip.”

It was a decent cover, but from under the gown the twins could feel the suspicious gaze Lampton was giving Red.

“Are you feeling all right, Your Majesty?” Lampton asked her. “You’re walking so slowly—are you ill?”

Alex and Conner exchanged a glance, wondering how Red was going to cover up this one.

“Perfectly fine, Sir Lampton,” Red said. “I just selected the wrong pair of shoes to travel in. My feet are killing me.”

Alex and Conner sighed with relief. Conner gave Red a thank-you pat on her knee. She quickly slapped his head through the gown and Conner bit his fist to silence a scream.

“Just an itch,” Red said with a tight smile.

“How are things here?” Froggy asked, trying to distract Lampton.

“Terrible,” he said. “Have you not heard?”

“I’m guessing not,” Froggy said. “What happened?”

Lampton let out the most troubled sigh the twins had ever heard. “Princess Hope was kidnapped last night.”

The twins gasped, unable to contain their shock, but it was covered by the gasps coming from Red and Froggy.

“What?” Froggy said, devastated by the news about his only niece. *“What do you mean, kidnapped? By whom?”*

“Rumpelstiltskin,” Sir Lampton said. “It looks like he’s working for the Enchantress again, only this time he succeeded.”

It grew quiet. The whole world seemed to be falling apart for everyone.

A few moments later, after traveling across the red-carpeted interior of the Charming Palace's entrance hall, the twins knew they had arrived inside the ballroom, recognizing the golden dance floor beneath them. The room was filled with troubled voices and impatient footsteps milling about.

"Here, Your Majesty, please have a seat," the twins heard Sir Lampton say.

"Thank you," Red said. "I'm now going to *slowly sit* on the stool I've so graciously been provided with.…"

The twins cringed from the inelegance of Red's statement, but thankfully everyone else in the room was too occupied to have even noticed Red and Froggy enter the room. She slowly sat on the stool placed behind her, giving the twins enough time to adjust themselves to her seated position, sitting on the floor beside her. It was a relief to all their joints.

The twins could hear small conversations from all corners of the room. They wished they could put faces to the voices they heard.

Conner nudged Alex and quietly gestured to a loose seam he'd found in Red's dress. He carefully pulled the seam apart even more and created a small hole to peek out of. Alex did the same on her side and they were finally able to see outside the gown.

Although they knew everyone in the room, there was so much heartache and hopelessness worn on all the faces, the kings and queens were almost unrecognizable. It was hard for the twins to see them all like this; their lives had always been perfect examples of happiness, but here they were now, the most distraught group of people they'd ever seen.

Queen Cinderella was seated on her throne, devastated beyond belief. Her hands covered her swollen eyes as tears rolled down her face. She was comforted by Queen Snow White and Queen Rapunzel, who used the tip of her remarkably long braid to dry Cinderella's tears.

The men paced around in the corner of the ballroom. King Chance never stopped moving, furious that his daughter had been taken from him. King Chandler and Rapunzel's husband stood near him, unable to do anything but watch. Froggy joined them, lending his support with his presence.

"Last night I heard her crying," Cinderella told the women at her throne. "I got out of bed and went to her room. A few of the maids were on their way inside, but I insisted on checking on her myself. When I opened

the door the first thing I saw were the curtains blowing inside. I thought it was strange—I didn't remember leaving her window open—and that's when I saw him… *that horrid little man holding my daughter*!"

Heavy streams of tears flowed down the queen's face. Rapunzel rubbed her back and Snow White held her hand tightly.

"Breathe, Cinderella, breathe," Snow White told her.

Cinderella caught her breath and continued. "Then he looked me right in the eye and hopped out of the window. I screamed and ran to the windowsill, trying to see if I could see them below, but they were gone," she said. "That disgusting man disappeared with my baby!" Snow White held her and she cried into her shoulder.

"This is all my fault," said a soft voice across the room. Queen Sleeping Beauty stood at the window in the back of the ballroom, listlessly staring at the land outside.

"I'm the one she wants, I'm the one she's after," Sleeping Beauty said in a daze. "Why doesn't she just take me? Why does she have to make everyone else suffer?"

"This isn't your fault," Rapunzel said.

"You can't blame yourself for this," Snow White agreed.

King Chance grew tired of pacing and groaned angrily. He needed *someone* to blame. "Where are those useless fairies?" he demanded. "And why haven't they done something about this yet?!"

A soft breeze blew through the ballroom, and twinkling lights of all the colors of the rainbow floated through the room. The Fairy Council slowly appeared out of thin air.

Emerelda was first to appear. "We're doing everything in our power," she said. She was tall, black, and beautiful. She wore a long emerald gown that matched her eyes and jewelry. Emerelda always had a soft but authoritative presence; she was someone you could trust but never wanted to cross.

Xanthous was next to arrive and was followed by Skylene, the blue fairy. She had pale skin, hair the color of the sky, and robes the color of the ocean. Tangerina appeared shortly after her. She was the orange fairy and actual bees flew around her beehive. Violetta, the purple fairy and oldest of the council, popped up close to where Red and the twins were sitting.

Rosette, the short, plump, and rosy-cheeked red fairy, appeared next. Coral, the youngest and the pink fairy, showed up shortly after that, hovering in the air thanks to her tiny wings. The fairies' colorful arrivals were a beautiful sight, but not beautiful enough to raise the spirits in the room.

"Well, it's not enough," Chance yelled at them. "The Enchantress is one of you, isn't she? You outnumber her—why can't you handle this?"

"We are greater than her in size, but not in strength," said Skylene in her dreamlike voice.

"She's managed to grow more powerful than we ever imagined," Xanthous said. "I'm afraid even the Fairy Godmother is no match for her."

"Speaking of the Fairy Godmother, has she or Mother Goose arrived yet?" Emerelda asked, looking around the ballroom. "We need to begin."

Another soft breeze blew through the room, this time carrying white sparkling lights that circled into a vortex in the center of the room. A moment later, the twins' grandmother appeared with her crystal wand raised.

The twins looked nervously at each other. Now that their grandmother was here they were *officially* in the same room as everyone they wanted to avoid.

"Forgive me for being late," the Fairy Godmother said and politely acknowledged everyone in the room with a comforting nod. "There was a bit of an issue in the Otherworld."

The twins had never heard their world referred to as anything else but *home* before; it was odd to hear it have a name of its own, although not entirely surprising. What else had the fairies been calling it this entire time?

"Red Riding Hood, my word, that is *quite* a dress you're wearing," the Fairy Godmother said when she saw Red sitting in the oversize gown.

Alex and Conner could hear each other's heartbeats and were terrified they were about to be discovered.

"Well," Red said nervously, thinking as quickly as possible. "It's important to dress your best when the world is at its worst… to raise morale."

"Yes, I suppose that is true," the Fairy Godmother said, though she didn't sound fully convinced.

“With all due respect, I don’t believe this is the proper time to be talking about dresses and the Otherworld,” King Chance said, his frustration building every second spent without his daughter.

“Will Mother Goose be joining us?” Emerelda asked, getting the meeting back on track.

The twins’ grandmother dropped the subject of Red’s dress. “No, she stayed behind in the Otherworld,” she said. “My grandchildren are missing, so she agreed to continue searching for them while we have our discussion.”

“That’s *horrible*,” Red said, shaking her head a tad too much. “I hope they’re all right, I just *loved* those two so much.”

Alex and Conner shared a mutual eye roll.

“Is everyone else here?” the Fairy Godmother asked, still eyeing Red strangely.

“Everyone but the elves, ma’am,” Sir Lampton informed her from the side of the room. “We sent word of our meeting to the Elf Empire, but they have chosen to miss it, feeling the current situation has nothing to do with them.”

King Chandler sighed. “Typical,” he said. “The elves never get involved unless they have to.”

“Thank you, Sir Lampton,” the Fairy Godmother said. “Then let’s begin.”

King Chance stormed up to her. “Tell us why the Enchantress can’t be stopped! Why are all of you so incompetent?” he shouted.

The Fairy Godmother looked at him with her trademark compassion. “Chance, I’m afraid I don’t have your answers. Ezmia is just as big a mystery to me as she is to all of you.”

“Then tell us what you know,” Chance ordered. “Where did this monster come from? What is she after now?”

Sleeping Beauty took a few steps toward the Fairy Godmother. “I’m willing to give myself up to her if that’s what she’s after,” she said.

“My dear, you are not responsible for any of this,” the Fairy Godmother said. “I’m afraid I’m the one who is entirely to blame. Ezmia wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me.”

All the fairies lowered their heads, knowing the Fairy Godmother was telling the truth.

“What do you mean, Fairy Godmother?” Cinderella asked. “Surely someone like you couldn’t be accountable for a creature like that?”

The Fairy Godmother closed her eyes and took a deep breath, deciding where to begin. There was so much to tell and not enough time to tell it.

“It all started centuries ago, on one of my first visits to the Otherworld,” the Fairy Godmother explained. “It was a horrible time for that world; there was plague and war everywhere you looked. Today they refer to that period as the *Dark Ages*, and there couldn’t be a better description. Sometimes the air would be filled with so much smoke from all the destruction the sun would be hidden for days at a time.

“I discovered a little girl all alone in the middle of the forest, no more than five years old. She was crying and was covered in ash and dirt. She told me that her name was Ezmia and that she had lived in a village nearby. Like many of the villages at the time, hers had been invaded by a group of barbaric soldiers. They swept through the village and killed everyone in their path, including her family.

“The soldiers discovered Ezmia hiding in a barn. However, when they tried harming her, the girl was able to defend herself using *magic*. She told me she had started a giant fire with just her hands and that it consumed her entire village and all the soldiers with it. The girl took me to her village so I could see the damage for myself, and it was devastating. Not only had the villagers perished, but all the land around the town for acres was destroyed. I knew then that this girl was no ordinary child.

“Magic has always been a mysterious thing, but I’m absolutely astonished that a child in the middle of another dimension could have such capabilities. But for whatever reason, magic had found this girl and had saved her life, and I believe my discovering her was no accident.

“I didn’t think she would survive the Otherworld on her own so I brought her back to our world. I knew she was special because when we arrived in the Fairy Kingdom, the unicorns bowed,” the Fairy Godmother said.

Conner looked at his sister. The unicorns had bowed to them when they first traveled to the Fairy Kingdom—what did it mean?

“Ezmia was raised there,” the Fairy Godmother continued. “We taught her how to use her magic and she became a fairy. Her powers grew with

time and she proved herself to be one of the most gifted fairies the Fairy Kingdom had ever seen.

“Ezmia was also the kindest, most honest, loving young woman I had ever known. She was so thankful I had brought her to live in our world and received so much joy from helping others. I loved her like a daughter and she became my apprentice. I was certain when my time came to an end I could leave this world safely in her hands. I was positive she would be the next Fairy Godmother. We created the Happily Ever After Assembly in hopes that Ezmia would lead it someday.

“But as Ezmia grew into adulthood, she changed. Things were going on beyond our knowledge—things we couldn’t see—and she became another person altogether. She became aggressive and mean-spirited; her interest in fairy life faded completely. Helping people became a chore for her and she started abusing her magic.

“It was during our first official meeting as the Happily Ever After Assembly that I knew Ezmia was no longer the little girl I saved in the Otherworld. We hadn’t officially appointed a leader of the assembly yet, so I was presiding. The trolls and goblins had just been sanctioned to their own territory but they were still enslaving innocent people from other kingdoms —I asked the rest of the assembly what the best solution was.

“Ezmia blurted out, *‘Why don’t we just drown them all? Thumbelina Stream practically runs through their territory; just break a dam and be done with them. We can make it look like an accident.’* She almost seemed amused by the idea.

“Naturally, after an outburst like that we couldn’t appoint her head of the assembly as planned. We appointed Emerelda and the Fairy Council instead. When Ezmia found out she had been replaced she was enraged. She went on a tirade, dissociating herself from the assembly and the Fairy Kingdom altogether. She changed her entire appearance and refused to be known as a fairy, deeming herself an *enchantress* instead.

“The next time we crossed paths with Ezmia was at Sleeping Beauty’s christening. She was uninvited, but we knew she would come anyway. We discovered Rumpelstiltskin had been working for her when he tried kidnapping Sleeping Beauty and we confronted her about it. Ezmia lost control and went on a rampage, cursing the princess to die after pricking her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel.

“However, I knew that the curse wasn’t only going to affect Sleeping Beauty; Ezmia’s powers were too strong for that amount of rage to be aimed at just an innocent child. Luckily, I was able to convert the curse into a harmless sleeping spell, and when she pricked her finger on a spinning wheel as planned the entire kingdom was affected, confirming my suspicions.

“Ezmia disappeared after the christening and we never saw her again. We searched everywhere but found no trace of her. Later, word reached us that she had been poisoned by the same toxins that left the upper Eastern Kingdom bare—we figured she must have died and stopped our search. Unfortunately, we were wrong.

“A year ago, my grandchildren accidentally found a way into this world and went missing. While I was searching for them I made a troubling discovery; small weeds started to grow in the Northeast where the flowers and grass had grown: The land had revived itself from the poison—except the poison had obliterated everything good that had come from the soil and the weeds had taken its place.

“I knew then it would only be a matter of time before Ezmia resurfaced. I alerted the Fairy Council at once and we spent the last year actively searching for her but found nothing to lead us in the right direction. It wasn’t until her recent attack on the Eastern Kingdom that we were positive she had returned.”

The crowd in the ballroom was even tenser after hearing Ezmia’s story.

“And why can’t we stop her *now*?” King Chance demanded. “If her spells could be converted back then, why can’t we get a grip on them anymore?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” the Fairy Godmother said. “We taught her everything she knows—we taught her how to use magic from her heart; we had trained her to channel it from a good source—that’s why every spell she ever cast could be altered. But when she was poisoned, anything good that was left in her soul was killed. Now Ezmia’s powers come from a place of darkness and anger, forces that we fairies don’t stand a chance against—and believe me, Ezmia has a lot of anger to feed off of.”

Alex and Conner couldn’t believe what she was saying. Was their grandmother insinuating that the Enchantress was *unstoppable*?

“So… what are we to do?” Snow White asked.

The Fairy Godmother lowered her eyes and looked down at the floor, hating to say it as much as they hated hearing it. “I don’t know,” she said softly.

And with that, whatever hope had survived was obliterated. It was if the Fairy Godmother had told them the world was over.

Suddenly, all the windows burst open and a monstrous wind blew inside the ballroom, knocking Sleeping Beauty to the ground. A gigantic bolt of lightning hit the floor so hard the entire palace buckled, and in its blinding flash the Enchantress appeared.

She was the most majestic person the twins had ever seen. Her hair and cape flowed through the ballroom, and although her mouth was still, her eyes smiled evilly through her long lashes.

“Hope I’m not late,” Ezmia said. “I do love a good story, especially when it’s mine.”

Alex and Conner clutched on to each other under Red’s dress. Everyone in the room was frozen in fear.

“Don’t tell me you’re having another party without inviting me,” Ezmia said, glaring at all the royals and fairies around her. “You’d think you’d have learned your lesson from the last time you didn’t include me.”

A smirk appeared on her face. Cinderella was the only person to move. She jumped out of her throne and ran straight toward the Enchantress with fists raised. King Chandler and Froggy were quick to grab hold of her, but she lunged with such determination Rapunzel’s husband had to join them in holding her back.

“You horrible witch!” Cinderella screamed, struggling against her brothers-in-law. *“Magic or no magic, I’ll pull you apart limb from limb if you hurt my daughter!”*

Ezmia just laughed at her.

“What have you done with our daughter, you monster?!” Chance yelled. Emerelda and Skylene placed their hands on his shoulders to keep him from charging toward her.

“She’s alive… for now,” Ezmia said and casually examined her nails. “I hope there are no hard feelings. I’ll give her back to you once I’m done with her… maybe.”

“What do you want with Princess Hope, Ezmia?” the Fairy Godmother demanded.

Ezmia squinted at the Fairy Godmother and walked in a circle around her, closely examining her former teacher. “Why, if it isn’t the big *F.G.* herself,” she said. “You’re looking rather old, *Grams*. Is something on your mind? Is something troubling you?”

“Don’t be cheeky, Ezmia, it’s a shade you never wore well,” the Fairy Godmother said.

Ezmia frowned at her playfully. “You’re good at putting on this noble façade, but I know better,” she said. “Have you told *them* what I took from you yet? Or have you left that part of your story out because you were afraid they would worry more knowing *you’re* just as terrified as the rest of them?”

The Fairy Godmother kept her silence, not giving in to Ezmia’s games.

“Fine, I’ll tell them,” Ezmia said and faced the rest of the room. “I have her *granddaughter*.”

Everyone in the room gasped, including the twins. *What was she talking about?* Alex wondered. The Fairy Godmother looked puzzled as well, wondering if the Enchantress had managed to get hold of Alex as well as Charlotte.

“My *granddaughter*?” the Fairy Godmother asked.

Ezmia rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t look surprised,” she said. “I took her weeks ago—you had to have known. I left you plenty of clues.”

The Fairy Godmother looked at Ezmia with the most neutral face she could muster. “How did you get to her?” she asked.

“It was simple, as most things are for me,” Ezmia said with a small shrug. “I stole that book of yours, the old one with all our history in it, *the portal*. I cast a tiny spell on it and was able to pluck her straight out of the Otherworld. I said, *‘Bring me the Bailey girl from the place where the Fairy Godmother’s precious Bailey family resides’* and that was all. Stupid woman, she didn’t even pretend to be someone else—she told me exactly who she was right from the beginning.”

Alex grabbed Conner’s hand and they locked eyes.

“She thinks Mom is me!” Alex whispered to her brother.

“And Mom must be going along with it!” Conner whispered back. “*But why was she taken instead of you?”*

Alex clutched Conner’s shoulder as the answer came to her. “Conner, I was in my honors class when Mom went missing. *I was in the next town—I*

wasn't in the place where we reside! That's why she got Mom instead!"

The Fairy Godmother began nodding her head, coming to the same conclusion as the twins. She looked over to Red and stared down at her huge gown again. The twins could have sworn she was looking straight at them—did she know they were under there? Whatever she did or didn't know, it made the Fairy Godmother stand a little taller knowing the Enchantress had made a grave mistake.

"I'll admit you have our attention now," the Fairy Godmother said, quickly looking back to Ezmia. "So what is it that you want from us? Why have you graced us with your presence tonight?"

A menacing smile grew on the Enchantress's face; this was the part she had been waiting two centuries to tell them.

"As you may have guessed, I've decided to take over the world," Ezmia said matter-of-factly with a small yawn. "But rather than continuing to show you examples of my powerful wrath, I've decided to give you an opportunity that will make all our lives easier. I want you all to renounce your thrones and hand over your kingdoms to me *willingly*."

The entire room erupted in outrage. The men had to restrain Cinderella once again.

"Never!" Chance shouted, speaking for everyone in the room.

"Even with an entire kingdom consumed and a young princess's life at stake there is *still* some hesitation?" Ezmia said, shaking her head. "I'm going to take over—it's unpreventable. I'm giving you a chance to accept your defeat with dignity; you'd be wise to take it."

No one moved or made a sound under Ezmia's heavy glare. She turned to Sleeping Beauty, who was still on the floor, trembling under the Enchantress's gaze.

"Why don't you do it first, *Sleeping Beauty*?" Ezmia said. "Show your fellow rulers how easy it is. Your kingdom has been through enough already, wouldn't you agree? Ease their sufferings—do it for your *people*, for your *husband*. If you hand me over your kingdom, I'll release it from my enchanted plants. Do we have a deal?"

All was quiet while Sleeping Beauty contemplated the impossible decision. Snow White and Rapunzel shook their heads, urging her not to give in. Finally, Sleeping Beauty stood up and slowly walked over to stand behind the Fairy Godmother.

“Any partnership I make will be made against you,” Sleeping Beauty said. “And my people would expect nothing less.”

All the monarchs and fairies looked to one another, inspired by Sleeping Beauty’s bravery. One by one, they walked across the ballroom and stood behind the Fairy Godmother, showing the Enchantress where their loyalties would remain.

Ezmia was beside herself with rage. The twins were positive they could see small flames flickering from her eyes. “You’re all making the greatest mistake of your reigns,” she said. “But don’t worry—they’ll be ending soon.”

The Fairy Godmother took a few confident steps toward Ezmia. “No one in this room may be able to stop you, Ezmia,” the Fairy Godmother said and then glanced in the twins’ direction. “But I have nothing but the highest confidence someone *unrevealed* will find a way.”

Alex and Conner looked to each other. Her words were so carefully chosen—*was she talking about them?*

Ezmia’s anger turned to amusement and she let out a long laugh. “I see,” she said. “You all think you’re safe standing behind your precious Fairy Godmother. Well, in case you think her promising words alone can save you… *allow me to clarify*!”

Ezmia reached an open hand toward the Fairy Godmother and a gigantic bolt of lightning erupted from it. It hit the Fairy Godmother and she disappeared. A turquoise jar appeared in the Enchantress’s hand and a ghostly version of the Fairy Godmother appeared inside of it.

“What will the rest of you do now that I have the Fairy Godmother’s *soul*?!” Ezmia asked the room.

Alex and Conner squirmed frantically around in Red’s gown. Alex had to hold her brother back as he tried running toward the Enchantress like Cinderella.

“She’s got Grandma!” Conner whispered, begging his sister to let him go. *“She’s got Grandma!”*

“She can’t know we’re here, Conner!” Alex whispered back to him.

“Consider this my final warning,” Ezmia declared to the crowd. “My attacks on your kingdoms will continue until you surrender to me. We’ll see where you stand when all your people are begging you to make the suffering end. Your days of happily-ever-after are over.”

Another gigantic bolt of lightning hit the palace and the Enchantress disappeared, taking the Fairy Godmother with her.

Everyone in the room was as pale as Snow White. The twins froze inside Red's gown with their hearts broken. No one knew what to do. All the kings, queens, and fairies searched for some sign of optimism in one another's eyes, but there was none to be found.

For the first time in history, the leaders of the fairy-tale world were helpless.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JARS OF SOULS

Deep in the heart of the Dwarf Forests, where the trees and shrubbery grew the thickest, was a small hut unseen by all who passed it. A witch named Hagatha had lived in the hut many years ago and strategically planted a wall of thornbushes around her home, making it virtually impossible to find. And although the witch was long dead, the hut had more residents now than ever before.

The Enchantress had turned the hut into her new home following the restoration of her powers. It still looked the same on the outside, with only two windows and a hay roof, but it had been charmed to become a spacious manor the moment someone walked through the door.

It had large rooms with high ceilings and black stone walls. A wide fireplace was made of amethyst stones, within which a fire of purple flames burned a collection of skulls like firewood. The furniture was made of exotic porcupine and salamander animal skins. A chandelier made of various species' teeth hung from the ceiling but gave no light.

It was usually a quiet place, but tonight the piercing cries of a child echoed through its halls.

"Please be quiet, little Princess," said Rumpelstiltskin. Princess Hope was more than half his size, but he still rocked the one-year-old back and forth, trying to soothe her.

"Mama," the princess cried. *"Mama!"*

"You can't have your mama, I'm afraid," Rumpelstiltskin told the child, and she bawled harder than before.

"She's been crying for more than a day," said Charlotte Bailey from the back of the room. "Would you please just give her to me?" The twins' mother was imprisoned in a large birdcage that swung a few feet above the ground.

"What makes you think you can get her to stop crying?" Rumpelstiltskin said. He was exhausted from having to care for the child the last day.

"I'm a nurse—it's what I do," she said.

Charlotte was still dressed in her nursing scrubs. She had just finished a shift at the children's hospital when a mysterious blanket of light wrapped around her and transported her into the fairy-tale world. It didn't take long for Charlotte to realize that the Enchantress who had summoned her there was after her daughter, and so for Alex's protection, Charlotte had pretended to be her daughter.

It didn't appear that Princess Hope would calm down anytime soon. Against his better judgment, Rumpelstiltskin handed the young princess to Charlotte through the bars of the cage. He didn't care how angry Ezmia would be to find the child with the other prisoner; he just wanted the crying to stop. Rumpelstiltskin had never been good with kids.

"There, there, baby girl," Charlotte said and stroked Hope's auburn curls. "It's all going to be okay, it's all going to be okay."

Slowly but surely, Princess Hope calmed down in Charlotte's maternal embrace, sleeping for the first time since she had been taken. All the young princess needed was a mother's touch.

Rumpelstiltskin was so relieved to have silence; he could have slept for three days if he were allowed. Charlotte studied the little man. Nothing about him was malicious like his master. He seemed like such a gentle and kind man.

"So you're Rumpelstiltskin?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said with a remorseful shrug, ashamed of the reputation that came with his name.

"Did you really spin hay into gold for the maiden, like the story says?" Charlotte asked.

"That I did," Rumpelstiltskin admitted.

"And did you really try to take her firstborn child away from her?" Charlotte said, finding it hard to believe.

Rumpelstiltskin let out a heavy sigh. "That's what *Ezmia* wanted me to do," he said. "But I couldn't go through with it. I told the maiden—well, she was a queen by that point—that I would dismiss her end of our bargain if she could guess my name."

"And she did, if I recall," Charlotte said. It had been a while since she'd heard the story.

"I made sure she did," Rumpelstiltskin confessed. "I caught one of her soldiers following me. I danced around a fire, proclaiming my name to the

whole forest as loud as I could."

"So you intentionally made it easy for her," she said. "That was very kind of you."

A tiny smile grew on Rumpelstiltskin's face, but it quickly faded. "I thought so, too," he said. "Unfortunately, no one will ever know that part of the story."

"People are quick to judge," Charlotte said. "And I'm no exception. I never wondered why you did all of those things; my mind was just made up that you were a… a—"

"Villain?" Rumpelstiltskin asked, unfazed. It was what he had been known as the majority of his life.

"Yes… a *villain*," Charlotte admitted.

Rumpelstiltskin was growing very comfortable talking to Charlotte—too comfortable. Had he not been so tired, he might have kept his guard up, but he couldn't deny there was something trustworthy about Charlotte. They were both good people stuck in a bad situation.

"How did someone like you get mixed up with someone like *her*?" Charlotte asked, shaking her head.

"Because I had the misfortune of being born a dreamer," he said sadly. "A dwarf is born with one option: *Become a miner*. A life spent in dark tunnels under the ground was never what I wanted for myself. I always loved being outside with the plants and animals; I used to daydream about being a shepherd or a farmer. My brothers used to scold me day and night for it. They said being a miner was an honor and that I was lucky. Then one day Ezmia came to me with an offer to be her apprentice."

Rumpelstiltskin rubbed his eyes and took a seat on a porcupine-skin chair, too fatigued to mind the needles poking him.

"It's funny," he said. "I didn't think twice about saying yes, but I've regretted it every day of my life."

Charlotte couldn't help but feel sorry for him. She realized there were *three* prisoners under this roof.

"Anyone would have said yes if they were in your shoes," she said.

"Back then, perhaps," Rumpelstiltskin agreed. "But *now* no one would ever admit to it."

A strong breeze blew through the room. "Why is the child with *her*?" said a booming voice that made Charlotte and Rumpelstiltskin jump. Ezmia

had suddenly appeared.

The Enchantress seemed tired. Her posture wasn't quite as straight and her hair didn't flow as freely as it had before. Ezmia had been planning this night for a long time, and it hadn't ended the way she wanted.

Rumpelstiltskin immediately hopped out of the chair. "Princess Hope wouldn't stop crying," he said. "And I wanted you to have a silent home to return to."

Ezmia scowled at Charlotte and she held on to the princess even tighter. The Enchantress moved toward the cage and peered in at them through the bars like a preying hawk.

"You're awfully good with children, aren't you?" Ezmia said suspiciously.

"I told you, I'm a nurse, it's my job," Charlotte said, shifting uncomfortably under the Enchantress's gaze. "I take care of sick children at a hospital."

Ezmia raised an eyebrow. "Interesting," she said. "I never expected the Fairy Godmother's granddaughter would be so *old*."

"Well, not all of us have magic holding us up," Charlotte retorted.

"You've got spirit, I'll give you that," Ezmia said. "Perhaps *this* will humble you."

Ezmia placed the glass jar she had been carrying on a small table close to Charlotte's cage. Charlotte was horrifed to see a miniature ghostly version of the Fairy Godmother trapped inside.

"That's my… my… *grandmother*!" Charlotte said, almost forgetting she was still pretending to be her own daughter. "What have you done to her?"

A smile appeared on Ezmia's face, matching the satisfaction in her eyes. "I captured her soul," she said.

The thought almost made Charlotte sick. She'd had no idea such a thing was possible, even in the fairy-tale world.

"What do you want with her soul?" Charlotte asked.

"It's a bit of a hobby of mine, actually," Ezmia said and walked to her fireplace. Displayed proudly on the mantel were five other turquoise jars, each containing a ghostly substance.

"You're a *soul collector*?" Charlotte asked. "Is it to make up for being soulless?"

“What a clever play on words,” Ezmia said mockingly. “You know that phrase *forgive and forget*? Well, I always disagreed with it—I found it impossible, actually. People would do me wrong and then *forget* about me, as if their actions didn’t matter—because *I* didn’t matter. How was I supposed to *forgive* people like that?”

“So you imprisoned their souls instead of forgiving?” Charlotte said.

“Precisely,” Ezmia said. “I found taking away their life force to be much more appealing than simply *forgiving*. To forgive would be to allow them to continue living their lives, free of consequence. But by taking their souls and preventing them from all future happiness, I could heal and find peace.”

Charlotte couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Do you honestly expect anyone to sympathize with that?” Charlotte asked her.

Ezmia stared into the fire at the burning skulls, almost in a trance. “I don’t want the world to *understand*; I want it to *grovel*,” she said.

The confession made Charlotte’s heart heavier. She wondered if she would ever escape the clutches of a person who thought like this. But thinking about her children, Bob, and the life she had been stolen from gave Charlotte the strength to survive the Enchantress’s imprisonment.

“I find it hard to believe that the Fairy Godmother, who is known for her generosity, would harm you in any way,” Charlotte said.

“Sometimes help can be just as destructive as harm,” Ezmia said. “But I imagine someone who *helps* for a profession couldn’t comprehend that.”

“Enlighten me,” Charlotte challenged.

The Enchantress raised her eyebrows. “The Fairy Godmother found me in the Otherworld when I was just a girl,” Ezmia said. “I was alone, orphaned, and starving. She brought me here to live with the fairies in the Fairy Kingdom. They gave me a home, taught me to use magic in a productive manner, and in time trained me to become one of the greatest fairies in the kingdom.”

Charlotte shook her head as though she had misunderstood. “That doesn’t sound like something to begrudge,” she said.

“Success can scar you as much as failure,” Ezmia continued. “The more I surpassed the other fairies with my talents, the more they resented

me. Fairies are incredibly jealous creatures, although no one ever talks about it, because it would tamper with their image.

“When the Fairy Godmother declared me her protégé, all the other fairies distanced themselves from me. I had never asked for the attention, but they targeted their frustrations on me as if I had done something to personally offend them. Every spell I cast and every enchantment I performed was subject to an unjustified amount of criticism.

“Even though I was accomplishing incredible things left and right, my achievements were ignored because of the special treatment I received. I became ashamed of my gifts and mediocrity became my new goal—wanting to be in the same league as the others. Lowering my standards only aggravated them more, and by the time I reached adolescence I was alone and starving again, but this time for *affection*.”

The Enchantress gestured to the jars displayed on her mantel.

“Which brings us to these,” she said. “Now this section of the story is very close to my heart, you see, because inside the jars on my mantel are the souls of five men who unwisely broke it. One man who never loved me, one man who couldn’t love me, one man who loved me too much, one man who loved me in secret, and one man who didn’t love me enough…”

Ezmia picked up the jar farthest to the left and looked inside it. A figure of a young man wearing an apron appeared in the ghostly substance inside.

“The Baker was my first love,” the Enchantress said. “He lived in a small village in the Charming Kingdom and worked in his family’s bakery. He was the first person besides the Fairy Godmother to ever ask me if I was having a good day. I was so young and vulnerable—all it took was a shared smile to make me fall madly in love with him. We became very close and I confessed my deepest secrets and desires to him. I was positive our love would last forever.

“Unfortunately for me, I learned his intentions were anything but genuine. I had been the subject of a practical joke—the Baker had pretended to have feelings for me only to report back to the other village youths everything that I had confessed to him. He had been playing a game with my heart the whole time.

“I went back to the Fairy Kingdom in tears. I was hoping for some kind of sympathy from them, some sort of compassion—but instead they

just laughed at me. They were happy to see something topple me from the pedestal I had never asked to be placed on. You see, I had broken an unwritten rule: Apparently, a person of privilege is never allowed to complain about anything.

"With no one to confide in and no shoulder to cry on, I ran into the forest and collapsed onto the roots of a tree. I lay there for hours and cried my heart out into its bark. That tree was the only thing that ever comforted me from the pain… and I visited that tree quite a bit over the years.

"Over time I tried *forgiving* the Baker, but it only angered me more. I returned to his bakery and demanded an apology. He refused, saying the whole thing had been a childish prank. So I cast a spell on a gingerbread man he was baking. It jumped up from the tray and ran away from him. It became quite the ordeal; the entire village chased after it with no success.

"The Baker and his family became the laughingstock of the village and they lost their bakery… but it made *me* feel *so much better*. That's when I learned that taking the high road would never give the same satisfaction as getting even."

The Enchantress set aside the Baker's jar and moved on to the one next to it. A man holding a hammer with a chain draped over his shoulder appeared in the jar.

"The *Locksmith* was a troubled man," Ezmia said and shook her head. "A testament to his profession, he liked keeping his properties locked down, and I was no exception. I fell for him mostly out of convenience—needing something to repair my heart from the damage left by the Baker. He was such a quiet man, he barely said a word to me. He never looked me in the eye and when he touched me… it was rarely out of affection.

"He definitely left his mark on me—*several*, actually. And, like a fool, I stayed, thinking it might be the only type of love I would ever receive. When I finally told him I was leaving him he didn't even blink. He had so many demons already I didn't feel the need to cause him more distress when we parted. I felt more anger toward myself than I did toward him for *letting* him harm me. I kept him as a reminder—to never let myself sink to such pitiful depths again."

Charlotte and Rumpelstiltskin looked sideways at each other. They couldn't believe the Enchantress was telling them so much, but Ezmia had

completely lost herself in a stroll through the most painful memories of her past.

The trip down memory lane wasn't entirely for them, however. Telling her captives the stories of her former loves appeared to gradually rejuvenate her from her long night. She stood taller and her hair flowed more vigorously above her. The purple flames in Ezmia's fireplace even grew the more she reminisced. It was undeniable; the Enchantress was fueled by the pain of her past.

Ezmia picked up the third jar in the center of the mantel. A man playing a pipe appeared in the cloudy substance.

"The Musician was the lover I thought I had been waiting for," Ezmia confessed. "I was so taken by his charm. He constantly serenaded me with songs and sonnets. He was so eager to confess our love to the world—*too eager*. I soon realized that it wasn't *me* he was in love with—it was the *idea of me*. He wanted the world to know he was connected to *the future Fairy Godmother*, not *Ezmia*. He was using me like a ladder.

"However, I stayed with him despite knowing his true intentions, dreading the thought of being alone. I showered him with gifts—in particular, an infamous pipe he used to magically clear a town of rats. I had enchanted the pipe myself and had hoped it would equalize our statuses. I thought if I gave him something that made him feel as important as me, he would learn to love me for me and not my title.

"Sadly, the only thing that grew following his victory was his ego, and it led him to infidelity as easily as he had led the rats to the river. I transformed his new lover into an instrument, so he could forever play her in the same way he had played with me."

The Enchantress picked up the fourth jar on the mantel. She stared inside at the soul of a man dressed from head to toe in armor.

"The Soldier was a very guarded man," Ezmia said. "He kept our relationship a total secret. It was refreshing to be with someone so private after the Musician. Later I discovered his discretion was not to protect me but to protect himself. The Soldier was *ashamed* of our relationship. He thought if word broke that he was courting a fairy it would damage his career and he would never be promoted to a general.

"I cast a spell on him that flattened his feet and stiffened his joints. He spent the rest of his days guarding the entrance to a kitchen and never

received any promotion at all."

The Enchantress moved on to the final jar on the mantel. A handsome young man wearing robes and a crown appeared inside of it. Ezmia looked at him differently than she had all the others—it was clearly the hardest memory to relive.

"The King hurt me more than anyone," the Enchantress confessed. "Unlike all the others, the King treated me with the compassion all the rest failed to. He was my best friend and the only person who I felt loved me back. Perhaps that common kinship is what made me fall for him more than the others and is why it still hurts to this day. However, he never loved me as much as I loved him. Friendship was the only thing he wanted from me.

"I visited him every day hoping he would change his mind. One day he caught me trying to give him a love potion. I had never seen him so angry; he shouted for the entire castle to hear that he would never love me the same way I loved him, even with all the love potions in the world.

"I lost my temper and I cursed the King to live as a hideous beast, turning him into the monster I thought he was. Eventually he found a girl to love him despite his animalistic features, and my curse was broken. The story of Beauty and the Beast has been exaggerated over time, but the King never told a soul I was the one who cursed him—he was still a friend after everything I had done to him.

"The King's rejection was the final break my heart could take. I thought if the *King* was incapable of loving me, then no one could. The Fairy Godmother says I changed over that period of time, and she's right. I represented 'happily ever after' but couldn't find a happily-ever-after for myself. Everywhere I went I was expected to solve problems, but I couldn't salvage my own. I began hating the world I stood for—I hated the fairies, I hated the pathetic people they helped, and I hated myself for being one of them.

"I stopped pretending I belonged among them. For the first time I began to say and do what *I* wanted to, rather than what I was *expected* to. If the other fairies were going to condemn me regardless of what I did, I figured I might as well give them valid reasons to.

"When they replaced me on the Happily Ever After Assembly and gave my seat to Emerelda, I can't say I was surprised. I was furious and hurt, but I knew the fairies had secretly been waiting for an excuse to take

something away from me. Emerelda had never been as gifted as me, but she had always been so *loved* by everyone she met—the fairies knew appointing her would hurt me the most.

"I ran into the forest and found my trustworthy tree to cry into. I stayed and cried for days and days—I felt as if my soul had finally been crushed, as if my entire life had been a cruel experiment to see how much heartbreak I could withstand.

"When I finally dried my tears I looked up at the tree—it was significantly taller than all the other trees in the forest. After all the tears I had shed over the years into its roots, the tree had surpassed all the others surrounding it. I was so ashamed of myself; I couldn't believe what I had let the world do to me. I cast a spell on the tree, causing it to curve and loop like a vine, until it was the same height as all the other trees and the evidence of my heartache was gone.

"That's the moment that the fragile heartbroken fairy inside of me died and the Enchantress was born. I decided from then on if the world was going to speak of my name it would be whispered in fear rather than mocked with envy. If the world was going to take all the joy from me, I would simply *take away all the joy from the world*."

Ezmia had almost forgotten she wasn't alone. All the pain from her past was what had created the person she was today, so it was difficult for her to realign herself with the present.

"Everyone goes through heartache," Charlotte said. "I've been through my own share of loss, but I got over it. I never plotted a ruthless revenge scheme or held the world responsible for it."

Ezmia jerked her head toward her. *"Really?"* she said angrily. "Have *you* ever felt loneliness so strong that it hollowed your soul with every heartbeat? Have *you* ever hated the sun for rising and forcing another day of solitude upon you?"

"I suppose not," Charlotte said. "No one ever had trouble loving *me*."

Rumpelstiltskin gasped at Charlotte's bold statement. Ezmia was almost impressed by Charlotte's fearlessness.

"Careful," Ezmia warned her. "There's a thin line between bravery and stupidity."

Charlotte turned away, unable to look at her anymore. Ezmia placed the jar containing the king's soul back on the mantel. "I should retire for the

night," she said. "I know I make it look so effortless, but world domination is exhausting. I'm going to rest for a bit before continuing my attacks across the kingdoms. I want to be at my best when I cause the world's worst."

Ezmia headed toward her chambers for the night, but Rumpelstiltskin stopped her before she left the room.

"Ezmia?" Rumpelstiltskin asked, carefully filtering any judgment in his tone. "Are you sure you'll ever find peace? Even after taking over the world, are you certain you'll be satisfied?"

Charlotte turned back, interested to hear the answer. A malevolent smile appeared on the Enchantress's face.

"Silly Rumpy," Ezmia said with a laugh. "Who said I only wanted *this* world?"

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WAND OF WONDERMENT

The carriage ride back into the Red Riding Hood Kingdom was a difficult trip to make. Witnessing the Enchantress take their grandmother's soul was the most devastating thing the twins had ever seen.

Alex cried into her brother's shoulder for most of the trip back to Red's castle.

"She has *Mom*, she has *Grandma*, and soon she'll have the whole *fairy-tale world*!" Alex sobbed. "She's taken everything from us!"

"Not everything, Alex," Conner said. His was the only reassuring voice in the carriage. "We have each other—and we'll figure out a way to get them back."

Although they appreciated his optimism, Froggy and Red couldn't help but have doubts. The world had been counting on the Fairy Godmother for a solution, and now that she was gone, nothing seemed powerful enough to stand against the Enchantress.

"I'm not sure we can fight this one, Conner," Alex said with tears spilling out of her eyes like a leaky faucet. "For the first time, I think the bad guy may win this story."

The despair grew inside the carriage with every mile it traveled. The twins, Froggy, and Red racked their brains for a solution but couldn't come up with anything. After a day and a half of traveling and worrying, they were very eager to reach Red's castle.

"That's funny," Red said, looking out the window. "I would have expected to be past the wall by now."

Froggy and the twins looked out the window, too. They were surprised there was no sign of the wall in the distance. It did seem to be taking longer than usual to get back to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom.

"Wait a minute…" Conner said and squinted at something in the distance. "Does that say what I think it says?"

The others looked out the window to what he was referring to. The carriage slowly passed a sign that made their stomachs turn.

BO PEEP FAMILY FARMS

“How is that possible?” Red said, and her eyes grew twice in size. “The Bo Peep farms are inside my kingdom. Where was the wall?”

Froggy and the twins stared out at the rural hills surrounding them, wondering the same thing. A few moments later they discovered a group of Red Riding Hood’s soldiers standing at the side of the road. They scratched their heads and looked around in bewilderment, just as confused as they were.

Froggy opened the door and poked his head out of the carriage as they passed them. “Excuse me, good sirs? What is going on? Where is the wall?”

“There is no wall, sir,” one of the soldiers said in disbelief.

“What do you mean, there is *no wall*?” Froggy asked.

“I mean, there is no wall *anymore*, sir,” the soldier said. “The whole thing disappeared earlier this morning.”

“What?” Red gasped.

“We were guarding the southern entrance when a bright flash came out of nowhere,” another soldier explained. “The next thing we knew, the whole wall was gone!”

Alex and Conner turned to each other, each thinking the same thing.

“The Enchantress,” Alex said. *“She’s started her attacks!”*

Red placed a hand over her chest, trying to calm her uncontrollably beating heart. Even after hearing the Enchantress’s warnings firsthand, she’d never thought *her* home would be targeted.

“Were there any casualties?” Froggy asked the soldiers.

“No, sir,” one replied. “Just a lot of confusion.”

Froggy shut the carriage door and sank into his seat across from the twins. “So it begins,” he said sadly to himself.

It was dusk by the time the carriages approached Red’s castle. They felt so exposed without the wall. And as they looked around the town, it was apparent the villagers felt the same. Everywhere they looked, wooden boards were nailed over doors and windows of the homes and shops, as if the residents were preparing for a storm.

“I haven’t seen people this frightened since the Big Bad Wolf was around,” Red said. “It reminds me of the days before the C.R.A.W.L. Revolution.”

Froggy took Red’s hand in his; her mind was too preoccupied to notice its cold, slimy texture. “Ezmia could have done much worse,” Froggy said.

“Thankfully, it was just the wall.”

His words had the opposite effect of what he’d intended. Red pulled her hand out from his and her eyes became watery.

“It’s not *just* a wall,” Red yelled. “That wall is what separates us from the rest of the world! It represents our safety and victory after years of struggling! The Big Bad Wolf and his succeeding pack may be gone, but that wall has always been a symbol of peace to my people.”

Red wiped away the few tears that had escaped, embarrassed by her outburst. “As soon as we get back to my castle I’m going to order a line of soldiers to surround the town at once,” Red said and nodded to herself. “We may not have a wall, but we *will* be protected.”

Froggy and the twins nodded along with her. The twins liked seeing Red give an official and selfless order as queen. Maybe Froggy had been right about her. Maybe there was much more to Red than they had ever considered.

They eventually reached the castle, and as soon as Red gave her orders to the soldiers, the four of them headed into the library for a much-needed quiet and recuperative evening. But as they walked in, they were shocked to discover a surprise visitor who had been awaiting their arrival.

“Jack!” Red yelled.

The infamous Jack of beanstalk fame was nonchalantly sitting in one of the armchairs. He was tall and handsome, with broad shoulders, exactly how the twins remembered him. He wore suspenders, and his trusty axe hung from his belt.

“Hello, Red!” Jack said and stood to greet the group.

Red went pale and stiff as a statue. “*What… what… what* are you doing here?” she managed.

“Visiting, obviously,” Jack said with a smile.

The young queen could only make a couple high-pitched squeals as she attempted to form another question. Froggy’s eyes went back and forth between Red and Jack—he couldn’t decide if the surprise was good or bad.

“Well, this is… *unexpected*,” Froggy said and chose to smile.

Jack’s face lit up when he saw the twins. “I remember you two,” he said.

“Hi, Jack,” Alex said.

“Hey, man,” Conner said.

Despite everything else on their minds, the twins were glad to see him. Red grew anxious quickly and she began looking around the library.

“Wait, Jack, if *you’re* here then that means—”

SLAM! The library doors shut with gusto. They all turned to see Goldilocks standing behind them.

“YOU!” Red said and pointed at her. She quickly backed away from her old nemesis.

“Hello, Red,” Goldilocks said with a fake smile. She wore tall leather boots and a long maroon knitted sweater. A silver sword swung from her side. She had golden curls and was just as beautiful as the last time the twins had seen her.

There was something different about Goldilocks and Jack that the twins noticed; they both looked much *happier* now that they were on the run together.

“Goldilocks!” Alex said, and she and her brother ran to give Goldilocks a hug.

“What a wonderful surprise,” Goldilocks said, and a proud smirk appeared on her face. “I would say, ‘It’s nice to see you again, children,’ but you’re hardly *children* anymore.”

Conner nodded. “Thank you!” he said. “That’s what we’ve been trying to tell everyone!”

Goldilocks playfully rubbed his head. “I had at least four warrants for my arrest by the time I was your age,” she said and then winked at Jack.

Jack smiled at her. “I’m a late-blooming bandit myself, but I’m catching up,” he said and winked back. They lovingly stared at each other as if no one else were in the room.

“YOU!” Red said, still pointing at Goldilocks. She looked like a teapot whose spout had been corked.

“Oh, relax, Red,” Goldilocks said. “We aren’t here to cause any trouble. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Red snorted. “You bet your porridge-loving indecisive behind you won’t be harming me! This is my castle!” she said. “You’re both wanted fugitives! How did you get inside?”

“We used the front door,” Jack said blankly. “They let us in without any trouble. I grew up with most of the guards, remember?”

Red looked back and forth between Jack and Goldilocks, not wanting to believe the statement was true. It was frustrating to feel so disrespected in her own home.

“Does the word *queen* mean anything to anyone?!” Red shouted. “Shouldn’t my *safety* be a *priority* in *my* castle?”

Froggy decided to break the tension. “Forgive us—we weren’t expecting company and have had a rough few days,” he explained, still a little on edge himself. “Why don’t we have a seat and catch up?”

No one argued. Everyone took a seat around the Big Bad Wolf floor rug. It took a minute for Red to gather her thoughts and join them. She sat next to Froggy but left a noticeable space between them. Jack and Goldilocks sat across from them, sitting so close to each other they looked joined at the hip. Alex and Conner shared an armchair adjacent to the couples.

“You just returned from the Happily Ever After Assembly meeting, I take it?” Goldilocks asked.

“Indeed,” Red said with her nose raised slightly. “Because that’s what we *law-abiding rulers* do: We meet *publicly* and discuss things that *benefit the greater good*.”

Her words didn’t affect Goldilocks in the slightest. “Where’s the fun in that?” Goldilocks said, happy to get under Red’s skin.

“How did it go?” Jack asked.

“It was awful,” Conner said. “The Enchantress showed up and kidnapped our grandmother! And she already has our mom!”

Jack and Goldilocks looked to each other with the same inquisitive expression. “What could she want with your mother and grandmother?” Goldilocks asked the twins.

Alex and Conner had forgotten Jack and Goldilocks had made a run for it long before they discovered who their grandmother was.

“Our grandmother is the Fairy Godmother,” Alex said with a shrug that said *“surprise.”*

Jack and Goldilocks looked rather impressed. “Well, how about that?” Jack said.

The twins told them all about how they were from another world and their grandmother had traveled back and forth for centuries sharing the stories of the fairy-tale world with theirs. Once Jack and Goldilocks had

processed the information, the twins continued to tell them how their father had used the Wishing Spell to be reunited with their mother in the Otherworld and how they had discovered the fairy-tale world by traveling through their grandmother's old storybook.

"Yes, yes, yes—and it was very touching," Red said, waving her hands. "They learned the Fairy Godmother was their grandmother and then all three of them disappeared through a door that led into a different world, blah blah blah—*you still haven't told me what you two are doing in my castle*?"

The twins could tell Jack and Goldilocks were interested in hearing more of the story but knew they'd better appease Red before her head exploded.

"We wanted to see if any progress had been made with the Enchantress," Jack said.

"Nope, there hasn't been any, sorry —you both can leave now," Red replied quickly.

Froggy placed his hand on her knee. "Darling, let's not be rude," Froggy said. "They may be emotionally distressing wanted fugitives, but they're still our guests."

The twins were eager to tell Jack and Goldilocks about the meeting from the previous night and didn't wait for Froggy or Red to get to it. They told them all about Princess Hope being kidnapped and how the Enchantress had taken their grandmother and was starting to attack the kingdoms.

"And there's nothing that can be done to stop her?" Jack said, shaking his head in the same disbelief the twins had felt for days.

"Unfortunately not," Froggy said.

"I don't know how the situation concerns the two of you," Red said and crossed her arms.

"This affects us, too," Goldilocks said. "We don't want to live in a world ruled by her, either. We thought we could help."

"Help?" Red said and laughed at the idea. "And what are you going to do, Goldilocks? Steal her jewels? Pick her locks? Test all her furniture until it's *just right*?"

Goldilocks stood and glared down at Red. It made the queen squirm in her seat. She looked to the others for help, but she was on her own.

“Is there something you want to say to my face, *Grandma’s girl*?” Goldilocks asked.

“No, I’d much rather say it behind your back,” Red said.

“I thought after helping me escape you had changed,” Goldilocks said. “But apparently I was wrong.”

“Well, I thought helping you would make me feel better, but I suppose I was wrong, too,” Red admitted and sheepishly glanced over at Jack.

Froggy raised his green index finger. “Moving back to more important matters,” he said, “the fairies and monarchs don’t have any clue what to do. The Fairy Godmother has always been able to just wave her wand and make things better, but unfortunately she can’t this time. So now we’re all waiting for a solution to arise… if there is one.”

The twins nodded. Goldilocks sat back down next to Jack and held his hand. The room was reunited with the hopelessness they had tried leaving in the carriage.

Suddenly, Conner cocked his head like a puppy.

“Froggy, what did you just say?” he asked, pointing at his amphibious friend.

“I said no one knows what to do,” Froggy said, not sure how he could have made it clearer.

“No, before that,” Conner said. “What did you say about the Fairy Godmother?”

Froggy looked at him peculiarly, wondering why he wanted the horrible news to be repeated. “I said the Fairy Godmother usually just waves her wand and makes everything better,” he said.

“Bingo!” Conner said and immediately jumped out of the armchair and ran toward the bookshelves.

“Conner, what’s gotten into you?” Alex asked.

“Hey, Froggy,” Conner asked, completely in his own world. “Where is that book we were looking at the other day? The one that had the chapter about the Wishing Spell in it?”

It took a moment for Froggy to remember. “*Myths, Legends, and Collecting Spells*?” he asked. “It should be on the shelf two over and one below the books from your sister. I’m very specific about where my books are kept.”

Conner scanned the shelves until he found it. “Gotcha,” he said with a satisfied jump. He sat back down next to his sister and flipped through the pages. “I think the answer we’re looking for is in this book!”

“Are you talking about using the Wishing Spell again?” Froggy asked.

“Could we use it on the Enchantress?” Jack asked.

“Trust me, wishing someone away never works,” Red said and raised an eyebrow in Goldilocks’s direction. Goldilocks placed a hand on her sword as a warning.

“We couldn’t use the Wishing Spell even if we wanted to,” Alex said. “The spell could only be used twice, and the Evil Queen was the second person to use it.”

“I’m not talking about the Wishing Spell,” Conner said, his eyes still glued to the pages he was searching. “I’m thinking about something even bigger and better and—*found it*!”

Conner turned the book around to the section he was referring to.

“ ‘The Wand of Wonderment’?” the room read together. Conner nodded enthusiastically, expecting them all to share his excitement. Unfortunately, everyone else just exchanged pitying looks with one another.

“Why are you all looking at me like I want to take my pet rock for a walk?” Conner asked. “This book says that whoever holds the Wand of Wonderment is *invincible*. Whoever gets their hands on it *could potentially stop the Enchantress*!”

Froggy looked at him regretfully. “That isn’t real, Conner,” Froggy said. “That’s just a childish legend like all the other subjects in that book.”

“Okay, says the *giant talking frog*!” Conner said with an eye roll. “This book talks about the Wishing Spell, too, and we’ve proven that *that* wasn’t just a myth. I bet most of the stuff in this book is real, too.

“ ‘The Wand of Wonderment,’ ” he read aloud from the book. “ ‘Many believe that possessing the Wand of Wonderment gives the beholder the gift of invincibility. It is said that the Wand is formed when combining the six most prized possessions of the six most hated people in the world. Although the idea is dubious, the legend of the Wand may have some truth to it considering the materials needed are most likely of a magic background. Unlike most collections, the materials required for making the Wand of Wonderment may change with the times.’ ”

Conner took a breath and looked up at the others, who still looked ambivalent.

“Oh, come on,” Conner said to the stubborn group. “You’ve got to admit that it doesn’t seem like too much of a stretch.”

Everyone was on the fence about it. Conner was frustrated that they weren’t as convinced as he was.

“My sister and I are from *another dimension*,” he said and then pointed to Froggy. “*This guy* has been magically transformed into a giant amphibian *twice*! What part about the Wand of Wonderment is hard for any of you to believe in?”

Conner made a valid point. What about this Wand was so hard for them to believe after all the other things they had witnessed? At least it was an *option*, and an option gave them *hope*. Alex silently stared down at the book with a growing eagerness in her eyes.

“Just out of curiosity’s sake,” Alex said, “who are the six most hated people in this world?”

Red looked up at Goldilocks and opened her mouth to answer.

“By the *world*, Red, not by you,” Alex clarified and Red went silent.

“I’d say the Evil Queen is a candidate,” Froggy said, and the others nodded in agreement.

“The giant,” Jack said. “And I’m not speaking from personal experience—people were terrified of him.”

“The Snow Queen,” Goldilocks mentioned. “Her historic reign over the Northern Kingdom still sends shivers down people’s spines.”

Conner was all ears, making mental notes of their suggestions. “Who else?” he said.

“You know, I’ve personally never cared for Miss Muffet,” Red said, as if she was confessing a horrid secret. “I mean, it was just a spider! Get over it!”

Everyone in the room stared at Red for a moment and then went on with their brainstorming.

“What about the Sea Witch, who traded with the Little Mermaid?” Alex said. “I was always scared of her as a kid.”

“Oh yeah! I bet all the fish in the sea are afraid of her!” Conner said.

Froggy sat straight up in his seat as another idea came to him. “Cinderella’s *wicked stepmother*!” he said. “The whole Charming Kingdom

despises her."

"This is great," Conner said. "So far we have the Evil Queen, the giant, the Snow Queen, the Sea Witch, and the wicked stepmother. We just need one more."

They all went silent and their eyes wandered around the room.

"Well, isn't it obvious?" Red said. "It's the *Enchantress*."

Lumps grew in everyone's throats; Red was right.

"Well, the Wand of Wonderment was a good *idea*," Goldilocks said, as if it were obvious it was no longer possible. Everyone slumped in their seats, but Conner wouldn't accept defeat.

"What's wrong with you guys?" he said. "We can't let confronting Ezmia get in the way. This may be our only chance at stopping her!"

He desperately looked to everyone in the room, hoping for someone to agree with him, but no one said anything. Conner leaped to his feet, deciding actions would have to speak louder than words if he wanted to get through to them. He walked around the room collecting random books off the shelves.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked him.

He didn't respond. He took a portrait of Red off the wall and added a couple candlesticks to his pile. He walked to the fireplace and promptly dumped everything into the fire.

"Conner!" Alex said.

"Those are mine!" Red said.

"Have you gone mad?" Froggy asked him.

Conner stood in front of the fireplace with his hands on his hips. The fire slowly consumed the pile of stuff behind him.

"You won't need them anymore," Conner said. "Don't you get it? If we just sit around and wait, the Enchantress is going to take over! *Everything* we love will be gone!"

Alex wanted to share her brother's passion, but she couldn't get her head past the odds. "Conner, it's just too dangerous. It's practically a death wish," she said.

Her lack of faith was about to make Conner jump out of his skin. "Doing *nothing* is a death wish!" he said. "If building this Wand of Wonderment thing offers us a chance at saving the world, we'd be idiots not to try it!"

Conner was practically in tears trying to convince them. Everyone looked back and forth between him and the objects burning in the fireplace. A decision had to be made. However, one thing was certain; whatever they did, they risked losing it all.

Froggy stood up abruptly. “I agree with Conner,” he said with his head held high. “We know the outcome of doing nothing, so I’d rather die fighting.”

Froggy’s words had a rallying effect.

“I’ve never been good at just sitting around,” Goldilocks said, standing with Froggy. “Besides, you’ll need someone who’s good with a sword out there.”

Jack stood next to Goldilocks. “If the Enchantress thinks she’s taking over without a fight, she’s mistaken,” he said.

Their determination made Alex’s heart skip a beat.

“This is a *really* big decision to make,” she told them. “Once we make it, there’s no looking back; we can’t give up if the stakes become too high. We won’t be able to do it unless we agree on that. No matter what, we can’t give up.”

Froggy looked to Jack, Jack looked to Goldilocks, and Goldilocks looked to Conner. The same confident smile appeared on their faces.

“I’m up for the challenge,” Conner said, looking to his sister.

Alex nodded and stood, too. “Then count me in,” she said and smiled.

“Me too!” Red exclaimed, the last to stand. “I have no additional point to make, but I support this venture completely! No one takes my wall away from me and gets away with it!”

Conner went to a desk in the corner of the library and quickly retrieved a piece of parchment and a quill.

“Let’s make a list of the things we’ll need to make the Wand of Wonderment!” he said. “We’ve narrowed it down to the six most hated people in the world—now, what are those people’s most prized possessions?”

Everyone sat down and began planning out the expedition.

“Everyone knows the Snow Queen’s scepter is her most prized possession,” Goldilocks said. “It’s where her magic comes from.”

“Snow Queen—magic scepter,” Conner said and wrote the information down.

“I imagine the wicked stepmother’s most valued possession has something to do with her family. An heirloom for her atrocious daughters perhaps,” Froggy proposed. “She won’t be hard to get to. She still lives in the same home Queen Cinderella grew up in.”

“Wicked stepmother—family heirloom,” Conner said and made a note of it.

“The giant’s favorite item shouldn’t be difficult to figure out, either,” Jack said. “There weren’t many things in his castle when I traveled there as a boy. It’s difficult finding material things that size.”

“Giant—to be determined,” Conner said.

“The Evil Queen’s would have to be her Magic Mirror,” Red suggested. “Think about all she went through to free that creepy bald man from it.”

“Evil Queen—Magic Mirror,” Conner said. “And just when I thought our Evil Queen days were behind us.”

“It’s in pieces at the bottom of castle ruins but it shouldn’t be hard to retrieve,” Alex said, trying to comfort him.

“What about the Sea Witch?” Red asked. “What could she not live without?”

“Her jewels!” Goldilocks said without hesitation. “It’s what she collects in exchange for favors. Unless she bargains for something greater.”

“Sea Witch—loves her bling,” Conner said and scribbled it down.

“All we have left is the Enchantress,” Alex said and the room unanimously took a deep breath. “What is Ezmia’s most prized possession?”

Everyone drew a blank. They all knew the Enchantress loved power, but how would that manifest as an object?

“We’ll have to come back to it. I’ll put a question mark by her name for now,” Conner said.

Goldilocks looked over his shoulder at the list they’d compiled.

“These people live far and wide across the kingdoms,” she said. “How are we going to get around?”

Jack looked over the list, too. “Not to mention a group of travelers would look awfully suspicious at a time like this,” he said.

“And we’ll need to travel fast, too,” Alex said. “The Enchantress said herself she’s grown impatient.”

The room was filled with a low humming sound as Froggy thought on it. “We’ll need something to travel in quickly and discreetly across the land,” he said, rubbing his chin. “Let me propose we forget about traveling on land and suggest we travel above it!”

Froggy hopped to the other side of the library and returned with a book. Alex recognized the title and instantly knew what Froggy was getting at.

“We’ll travel by *balloon*!” Froggy said excitedly. “Just like the travelers did in *Around the World in 80 Days*! I have to admit, I’ve been waiting for a situation to arise that offered an excuse to build something like it since I read the book.”

“Froggy, that’s very… *ambitious*,” Alex said.

“But it just might work!” Conner said. “The Enchantress isn’t going to be expecting people in the sky! This world is centuries away from aviation!”

“Precisely,” Froggy said and flipped through the book. He quickly grabbed the quill out of Conner’s hand and began sketching something on the back of their list. “Now, in the story there were only three travelers, so all they needed was a large basket to travel in. But I propose we go even further—we need something to glide across the sky *and* sail across the sea—so let’s build a *ship*!”

Froggy finished his drawing and showed it to the room. His proposal was a modest boat-shaped vessel with sails on the sides of a large balloon above it.

“Can we build something that extravagant in time?” Goldilocks asked.

Jack took the sketch and examined it himself, rubbing the side of his head. “It’s not the construction I’m worried about, it’s the amount of supplies needed to build it,” he said. The twins remembered he was a very talented carpenter, so they took his words to heart.

Red took a closer look at the drawing. “Exactly what kind of supplies would be needed?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Froggy looked down at the drawing. “Lumber, very sturdy fabric, and a lot of lamp oil,” he said.

Red squinted and quietly nodded, counting things off in her head. “Yup, I have all of those things here in the castle,” she said with a big smile.

Everyone did a double take at her. “Where?” Conner asked.

“We can weave the ship out of all the wood from my basket collection,” Red said. “I think my collection of summer dresses would provide enough fabric for the balloon and the sails—they were made with the finest fabric in the kingdom. As for the lamp oil, they keep barrels and barrels of it in the castle just to warm the water for my baths. And I take a *lot* of baths.”

“Didn’t you lose all your baskets in the fire?” Alex asked.

“Most of them,” Red said. “But I’ve had plenty of birthdays and holidays since then. My collection is practically complete again.”

The twins couldn’t argue. If the dress Red had worn to the Happily Ever After Assembly meeting was any indication, the queen definitely had enough supplies to go around.

“I think it may work,” Jack said. “I can have some better plans drawn up by tomorrow morning. Red, can you send for the best builders in the kingdom? We’ll need as many as we can get.”

“Absolutely,” Red said. “The third Little Pig happens to be one of the best builders in the kingdom, and he actually owes me a favor—he accidentally built part of his brick house on Bo Peep property and I pardoned him.”

“How long will it take to build?” Goldilocks asked Jack.

“Four or five days if we work diligently,” Jack said. “Three days if we work around the clock.”

“Terrific,” Froggy said.

“It’s really a great idea, Froggy,” Conner said.

Froggy smiled. “I think so, too,” he said. “It’ll make traveling a lot easier, not having to trek through the northern mountains to the Snow Queen or up a beanstalk to the giant’s castle.”

Jack cleared his throat. “Unfortunately, we’ll still need to climb the beanstalk,” he said.

“Why?” Alex asked.

“The beanstalk is what summons the giant’s castle,” Jack said. “It won’t appear unless the beanstalk grows to a certain height.”

Conner scrunched his forehead. “Where is the beanstalk, anyway? I don’t think we’ve seen it since we’ve been here,” he asked.

Red went silent and stared at the floor.

“Red, did you do something with Jack’s beanstalk?” Goldilocks asked, noticing her not-so-subtle bashfulness.

Red looked around the room with guilty eyes. “I may have had it *removed*,” she confessed.

“Removed?!” Jack yelled. “Why would you do that?!”

“Because it was an *eyesore*!” Red said defensively. “Besides, it was hard waking up every day and having *that* staring down at me—you know—after all of *this*.” She gestured to herself, Jack, and Goldilocks.

“Oh, great,” Goldilocks said. “Now what are we going to do?”

Jack sighed. “I’ll have to find the Traveling Tradesman again,” he said. “Hopefully he’ll have more magic beans or know where to get them. I’ll leave as soon as I get the builders set up tomorrow.”

“Then it’s settled,” Froggy said with a clap. “The five of us will leave as soon as the ship is ready.”

Red looked at him sideways. “What do you mean *five* of you?” she asked.

Goldilocks’s mouth fell open. “Don’t tell me you were planning on coming?” she said.

“Of course I’m coming,” Red said. “I’m supplying everything for it, aren’t I?”

“With all due respect, Red,” Conner said, “this trip may not be suitable for a queen.”

“Excuse me?” Red said, horribly offended. “If memory serves me right, the last time we were all together I had been kidnapped twice, thrown into a pit of demonic plants, and almost mauled to death all in the same day! Are you telling me my life can only be in danger when it’s convenient for *you*?”

Red crossed her arms even tighter and looked away from the others. There was no changing her mind.

“Darling?” Froggy asked. “Do you think that’s the best idea, given the *history* of everyone traveling?”

“I’m coming!” Red declared. “I’m not sitting around here and letting the five of you take credit for saving the world without me. I should start packing immediately! I’ve never packed for an adventure before!”

Red giddily got to her feet and ran out of the library. The others shot Froggy a dirty look.

“I’m going to go talk to her and explain the situation a bit more,” he said and quickly followed the excited young queen out of the room.

Jack went to the desk and began outlining better plans for the ship. Goldilocks stayed with the twins by the fire. A proud smile came to her face as she looked at them.

“What is it?” Alex asked her.

“Nothing,” Goldilocks said with a shrug. “I just recall a time when I told the two of you to be brave, and now look who’s doing the convincing.”

Alex and Conner exchanged a smile. They had grown a lot since their last trip.

“I should feed Porridge,” Goldilocks said. “I had to put her in the castle stables and she’s never gotten along very well with other horses.”

Goldilocks left the library, gently tapping the twins on their shoulders on the way out. It grew very quiet in the library, except for the flames flickering in the fireplace and the strokes of Jack’s quill as he worked on the ship’s designs.

“You almost lost me there,” Alex told her brother. “I felt so defeated—thanks for pulling me back.”

“Any time,” Conner said. “Thanks for helping me cheat on my tests in sixth grade.”

Alex let out a noise that was half gasp and half laugh. “How did you know about that?” she asked.

Conner looked at her. “The only C or B that belonged on my tests were my initials,” he said.

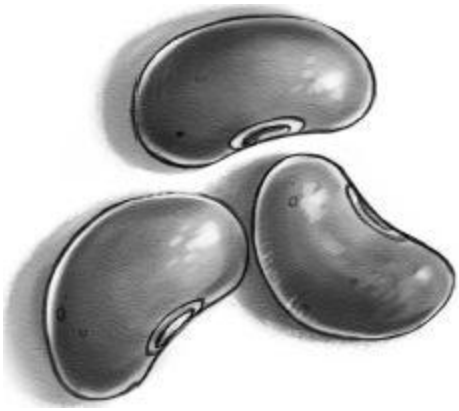
Alex laughed for the first time in two days. She missed the times when passing tests was their biggest concern.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Alex asked him.

Conner thought about it. “You mean another dangerous adventure through the fairy-tale world collecting various items with potential life-or-death stakes?” he asked with a sly grin.

Alex snickered. “Yes, that’s what I’m referring to.”

Conner thought about it for a moment and then nodded to himself. “Bring it on,” he said.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BEAN THERE, DONE THAT

The balcony doors burst open and Queen Red Riding Hood emerged from the castle. She was dressed in her best gown and was covered in her finest jewelry. Red always dressed to impress when speaking to her people.

"Fellow Hoodians," Red said with raised arms. "Thank you for joining me today!"

She glanced down at her observers and was disappointed by the lack of attendance. Although the entire kingdom had been invited to hear a message from the queen, only a crowd of roughly two dozen had gathered outside—including two sheep and a goat.

Red swallowed her pride and went on with her announcement.

"I'm assuming many people are too frightened to leave their homes, especially after the disappearance of our beloved wall, so please pass this message along," Red said. "However challenging the current times may be, I have called you all here to encourage your strength and bravery—we have faced great threats in the past and have always overcome them together as a kingdom! And as I look around at your faces I can see that courage in your eyes! The Enchantress may have taken our wall, but she will never take away our spirit!"

Red posed for applause but there was none to accept.

"Furthermore," she continued, "if there is one thing the people of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom know how to do—with the exception of the Boy Who Cried Wolf—it's survive!"

Red caught her breath. She had forgotten the rest of her speech.

"What was the other point I was going to make, darling?" The young queen spoke out of the side of her mouth. Luckily for Red, Froggy was standing inside the castle just on the other side of the balcony doors.

"We're going to rebuild the wall!" Froggy whispered to her.

"Oh yes, that's right! Thank you," Red said and then refaced her people. "We are going to rebuild our wall!"

Red struck another pose of grandeur. This time she didn't continue until she heard clapping from the people below.

“But before we do that, I’d like to invite all the carpenters in the kingdom to my castle this afternoon to work on something else—I know it’s short notice, but it would mean so much to me,” she said. “Thank you for joining me today, Hoodians! I wish you all peace and poverty!”

“Prosperity, my dear! Prosperity!” Froggy corrected her.

“I mean peace and prosperity!” Red declared and then quickly went back inside the castle. As soon as the doors shut behind her Red began taking off her jewelry and passing it to her handmaiden.

“Tough crowd,” Red said with a sigh. “At least I got all the ‘queen words’ in there.”

The twins had been listening to Red’s speech with Froggy.

“ ‘Queen words’?” Alex asked.

“Yes—*strength, bravery, courage, spirit*—the four words essential to making a good speech as queen,” Red said and then quickly changed the subject. “Have all the baskets and dresses been taken down to the courtyard yet?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the handmaiden said.

The twins had awoken that morning excited to see that the castle’s courtyard had been transformed into a workstation. Red’s servants piled thousands and thousands of baskets from her collection in one corner of the courtyard and hundreds of her summer dresses in another.

Jack had spent the entire night drawing up detailed plans for their flying ship. The blueprints were posted on an enormous board in the center of the courtyard for all to see.

“That should do it,” Jack said with a huge yawn. “How soon can we expect the builders?”

“A few have already arrived but the rest should be here by noon,” Froggy said.

Goldilocks scanned the courtyard. “I think we have a problem,” she said and gestured to the pile of dresses. “Who is supposed to make the ship’s balloon and sails?”

Alex and Conner looked at each other, each hoping the other would have an answer.

“Don’t look at me,” Conner said. “I barely passed Home Economics. I almost set the school on fire pouring cereal, remember?”

“I’m not very good with a needle,” Alex said. “Do you know of any good seamstresses in the kingdom?”

“I’ve already asked Granny,” Red said, happily charging into the courtyard.

No one said a word at first, but they were all thinking the same thing.

“Are you sure your grandmother is capable of stitching together a balloon and sails for a flying ship, dear?” Froggy bravely asked.

“Of course she is!” Red said without a sliver of doubt. “She and the Little Old Woman who manages the Shoe Inn will be here later to work on it. They were delighted by the request. Granny’s been making my clothes since I was a toddler. Trust me—if there’s anyone who can do it, it’s her.”

Within the hour, Red’s granny and the Little Old Woman arrived at the castle with their needles and thread ready. Unlike Mother Goose, these ladies were exactly how the twins had always pictured them. They both had gray hair wrapped into tight buns on the top of their heads and reading glasses placed on the tips of their noses. The Little Old Woman walked with a cane and Granny carried a large purse full of yarn and thread.

“Thank you so much for coming, Granny!” Red said and hugged her grandmother.

“No problem at all, sweetheart,” Granny said. Her voice was soft, slow, and soothing. “It’s rather nice to take a break from retirement. We can only play cards and watch the grass grow for so many hours in a day before it gets tiresome.”

“*What?!*” the Little Old Woman asked loudly. Obviously, she was a little hard of hearing. And if the way she was squinting was any indication, she was also hard of seeing.

Granny spoke directly in her ear. “I was telling Red that we’re happy to be out of the Shoe Inn.”

“*Who’s dead?!*” the Little Old Woman asked.

“Not dead—*Red*, my granddaughter,” Granny said.

“*Your granddaughter’s dead?!*” the Little Old Woman said, aghast.

Granny turned back to Red. “Don’t mind her, sweetheart. She has more than two hundred grandchildren—her ears aren’t what they used to be.”

Froggy, Goldilocks, Jack, and the twins were growing more pessimistic by the second. Could these elderly hands be given such a

daunting task?

"*This* is what we're trying to build," Red said and showed the old women the blueprints on the board. "Do you think you'll be able to make it?"

"Let's see," Granny said and pushed up her glasses for a better look. "Looks like you got a balloon and sails of some kind, huh? Are you kids going on an adventure?"

"It just so happens we are!" Red said with her head raised high. "We're going to save the world!"

"That's very nice, sweetheart," Granny said and patted her on the back. She didn't seem too invested in what Red had to say, as if a little girl had told her she was going to the moon. "Do you have fabric or should I run to the shop?"

"We should have everything we need here," Red said and gestured to the mountain of her dresses piled in the corner.

"Well, look at you, being thrifty," Granny said. She took one last glance at the board and at the pile of dresses and nodded. "Yes, I think we'll manage just fine."

Red jumped and clapped. The others looked more skeptical than ever.

"Are you positive you can manage?" Jack asked. Before he could get an answer the old women had sat themselves on stools near the pile of dresses and begun ripping their seams apart.

"Oh, this is nothing," Granny said. "Remember that summer *you* ballooned, Red? Poor dear, you gained so much weight I had to make you new clothes every week."

The twins had to bite their fists to keep from laughing. Goldilocks didn't even try to shield her chuckle.

"You don't say?" Goldilocks said with a sly smile.

Red blushed a deep shade of her name. "Granny, I don't think this is an appropriate time to—"

"That's why I made her the red cloak she's so famous for," Granny said, oblivious to her granddaughter's embarrassment. "It was the only thing that fit her longer than a week! She used to show up to my house with empty baskets every time I fell ill. I never understood why her mother was sending them to me; then I figured out Red was eating all the baked goods inside them on her way to my house."

No one in the courtyard could hide their laughter after hearing this. Even Froggy let a snicker escape.

“I was an emotional eater!” Red declared in her own defense. “I had a lot of things on my mind at the time.” She unintentionally glanced toward Jack. “Thankfully, like all my clothes, I grew out of that phase.”

“Yes, sweetheart,” Granny said. “We all were thankful for that—except for the fabric store.”

Granny and the Little Old Woman both ripped impressively long seams at the same time. The sound made Red cringe even more. Although it had been her idea, Red couldn’t bear to watch her dresses be torn apart—or to stick around for her granny to share any more embarrassing memories.

“If you all will please excuse me,” Red said and headed out of the courtyard. “I think I’m going to lie down for a minute. My life has suddenly become a Shakeyfruit play.”

Word must have spread through the kingdom, because by noon the courtyard was filled with dozens of builders and carpenters alike, eager to help their young queen. The third Little Pig was the last to arrive, pulling a toolbox half his size behind him.

“I huffed and I puffed and I dragged this all the way from home,” he told the others. “Serves me right for being in the red with Queen Red.”

Jack stood on one of the larger baskets to address the room. “Welcome, and thank you all so much for coming! I’m afraid the task is large and our time is short, so forgive me for speaking hastily. The queen has put together a small mission in hopes of salvaging what’s left after the Enchantress’s return. The mission involves a special ship, designed to sail across the clouds rather than the sea, and it must be built in record time.”

Jack walked across the room to the blueprints.

“If you could all gather round and take a look,” Jack instructed. “Our supplies are scarce but I believe if we follow these plans precisely we could build this in a matter of days. I won’t lecture you with the reasons this project must remain an absolute secret, I’ll only repeat that your involvement may finally free the world from the Enchantress’s grip. So if you all could be so kind as to lend us your labor, your strength, and your devotion, we can get started immediately and put a stop to this madness once and for all.”

None of the carpenters objected—his words had encouraged them past the point of questioning. Half of them began stripping the baskets into usable pieces while the others aligned them and started crafting them together to form the ship's bow.

Jack was beaming. For the first time in a long time, he was taking charge of something productive—and he was a great leader.

"He's really good at this sort of thing," Alex said to Goldilocks.

"Quite good," Goldilocks said with a bittersweet smile. "He doesn't get many opportunities to be a hero anymore."

Her face was full of pride, but as she watched him command the carpenters, the pride was replaced with guilt. Jack had been such a respected and valued member of the Hoodian society—he had thrown it all away in his decision to go on the run with her. Although Goldilocks knew it had been his own choice, she couldn't help but feel a bit responsible.

"Ouch!" Conner shrieked. He had joined the carpenters and kept getting splinters as he stripped the baskets apart. "How are you doing this so easily?"

The third Little Pig stayed silent and simply showed him his hooves.

"Gotcha," Conner said. "I've always thought thumbs were overrated."

The day flew by as the carpenters worked tirelessly on the ship. Jack was growing anxious, knowing he still had to track down the Traveling Tradesman. He left Froggy and the third Little Pig in charge of overseeing the construction after carefully going over his blueprints inch by inch.

"This is going to be better than I imagined!" Froggy said with a happy hop. "What do you call this contraption?"

The third Little Pig rolled his eyes. "That's a hammer," he said.

"So *this* is a hammer! Interesting," Froggy said and carefully examined it. Despite all that he had been through, he was still a prince at heart.

"On second thought, maybe I shouldn't leave," Jack said.

"They'll be fine," Goldilocks said and started to drag Jack away from the carpenters. "You're a terrific instructor."

Goldilocks and Jack were stopped before they could leave the courtyard.

"You two!" Red called down from an open window. She was holding a freshly opened white envelope in her hand. "Take the twins with you! I just

received word that fairies are coming to inspect our missing wall and I don't want *those* two hanging around when they do!"

"Ah, man," Conner said. "I was hoping to help with the ship!"

"Then you should definitely leave," the third Little Pig said and yanked a piece of basket out of his hands.

"Very well," Goldilocks said. "They can help us track down the Traveling Tradesman."

Alex and Conner had to admit they were a bit excited to go on the hunt.

"What am I supposed to tell the fairies when they see all of this construction going on?" Red asked.

Alex was quick to answer. "Tell them you decided to combine all your baskets into one big basket," she said.

Red scrunched her forehead. "Would anyone believe I'd do something like that?"

"Yes," the entire courtyard said in unison. Even the carpenters and the old women were in agreement.

Red grunted. "Fine," she said and promptly shut the window behind her.

"We're going to need another horse if the twins are traveling with us," Goldilocks said.

"Not to worry," Froggy said. "We have plenty of horses in the stables. You can have your pick of the lot."

The twins eagerly ran up to their rooms and collected the things they thought they'd need searching for the Traveling Tradesman. They met Jack and Goldilocks in the castle stables, where they were busy packing supplies onto Goldilocks's infamous cream-colored horse, Porridge.

Porridge glanced uneasily at all the other horses. Goldilocks hadn't been exaggerating; her horse really didn't care for other horses. And as the twins also glanced around at the perfectly groomed ponies, it wasn't hard to understand why. While Porridge had been out in the world running from the law with her mistress, all these horses had spent their days in their comfortable stalls—no wonder they didn't get along.

"Which horse should we take?" Alex asked.

"Um… *that one*," Conner said and pointed to a large brown stallion in the very back of the stables.

“Why that one?” Alex asked.

“Because he’s the only one that doesn’t have bows in his mane,” Conner said.

“That’s Buckle,” a stable hand told the twins. “Are you sure you want that one? He can be a tad aggressive.”

Conner did a lap around the stable to make sure. “Positive,” he said. “All the other ones look like they belong in the doll aisle at a toy store.”

“Suit yourself,” the stable hand said. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He threw a saddle with the largest silver buckles the twins had ever seen over the horse.

“Is that why you call him Buckle?” Alex asked.

“Partially,” the stable hand said. “You’ll see.”

A few minutes later Jack, Goldilocks, and the twins were off. Jack and Goldilocks led the way on Porridge while Alex and Conner rode on Buckle a few yards behind them. It didn’t take long to figure out why the horse had been given his name—he bucked aggressively every few feet and neighed loudly as he did. Clearly, the silver buckles on the saddle were the only fasteners strong enough to keep the saddle on the horse.

“How do you turn this thing off?!” Conner yelled, clutching the reins as hard as he could.

“I think I’m going to be sick!” Alex said. Her arms were wrapped around her brother’s ribs as tightly as possible without crushing them.

Goldilocks steered Porridge around to face Buckle.

“Porridge, tell the show-off to stop,” Goldilocks said to her horse. Porridge neighed disapprovingly at Buckle, and he stopped bucking immediately.

Porridge rolled her eyes at Buckle. Buckle snorted at Porridge almost flirtatiously. It made the twins a little uncomfortable—obviously there was a history with the horses, a history they weren’t interested in learning.

The twins followed Porridge out of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom and into a forest that rested along the Charming Kingdom and Fairy Kingdom border. Jack and Goldilocks were extra wary—the Enchantress had turned the entire world into the Dwarf Forests.

Before they knew it, nightfall was upon them, and they set up a small camp to the side of the path. Alex and Conner laid out some blankets on the ground to sleep on.

“This discomfort is almost comforting,” Conner said once he stretched out on the hard ground. “I think I actually missed sleeping in strange forests.”

“Get used to it,” Alex told him. “We’ve got a lot of adventure ahead of us.”

“True,” Conner said. “But at least this time we’ll have friends.”

Unlike her brother, Alex couldn’t sleep. After tossing and turning, she got up and had a seat next to Goldilocks, who was sharpening her sword by a tiny campfire. She kept an eye out while the others slept.

“You’re not like any other woman I’ve ever met,” Alex told her.

“Why is that?” Goldilocks asked.

“You’re just so confident and self-sufficient,” Alex said. “So many girls—especially in my world—are so insecure and jealous. We rely so much on one another, but we’re so mean to each other at the same time. We could use more women like you to look up to.”

Goldilocks was sad to hear it. “I was all those things once,” she said. “But after being on the run I’ve learned a life spent creating enemies isn’t worth leading. Having allies is the best advantage in the world. Jealousy is just a reminder of the frustrations you have with yourself. Who has time to only concentrate on that?”

Alex smiled. “That’s powerful,” she said. “I wish the girls at school could hear that.”

“Bring a sword to school. Trust me—those girls will leave you alone,” Goldilocks said.

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” Alex said. “Violence is frowned upon in my world. It’s not like it is here; it’s not *needed*.”

Goldilocks liked the sound of that. “Then find out what *your* sword is—find your own *advantage*—and wear it proudly. Beat those girls at their own game by seeming perfectly content in your own life,” she said. “Then again, I’m a wanted fugitive. I may not be the best person to give advice.”

Alex laughed. It was some of the best advice she had ever been given, even if it was by a crook.

Everyone was up by sunrise the following morning. To pass the time as they searched, Jack and Goldilocks told the twins all about their escapades over the last year on the lam.

“I knew Goldie could fight, but I had no idea what a warrior she was,” Jack said. “There I was in the Corner Kingdom, surrounded by twenty soldiers. I had just been caught stealing a loaf of bread from a bakery. I didn’t have my axe, a sword, or anything! I was helpless! Then, like a cannonball, Goldie and Porridge burst through the doors and Goldie fought off all of the soldiers single-handedly!”

“No way!” Conner said.

“He’s embellishing; there were only a dozen soldiers,” Goldilocks said with a modest shrug.

“Where did you learn to fight, Goldilocks?” Conner asked. “And could you teach me? I’ve always wanted to be a good swordsman.”

“When I was younger I realized no one was going to fight for me, so I picked up a sword and taught myself,” Goldilocks said. “I can show you a few tricks if you’d like.”

“Awesome!” Conner said. “I’ve got really good hand-eye coordination! I have the second highest score on Pac-Man at the arcade.”

Jack and Goldilocks had no idea if this was supposed to be impressive.

“Jack isn’t so bad himself, you know,” Goldilocks boasted. “Once he saved me from a trio of ogres! I was tied above a large boiling cauldron—they would have made a soup out of me if Jack hadn’t gotten there in time!”

Jack let out an indifferent laugh. “I only distracted them long enough for you to untie the knots,” he said. “She took care of them once she was free.”

“But it’s the thought that counts,” Goldilocks said and hugged his neck.

The Tradesman-bound group traveled up and down every path they found, looking everywhere for any sign of him.

“He should be in this area,” Jack said. “It’s where I found him as a kid. They call him the Traveling Tradesman, but he never goes far.”

“Wait a second,” Goldilocks said. She hopped off Porridge and scanned the dirt path. There were two sets of identical bird tracks on the ground that stretched a good distance behind and ahead of them.

“What kind of birds walk for this long?” Goldilocks asked.

Jack’s eyes lit up. The twins didn’t know what they were on to but knew they were making progress. Goldilocks remounted Porridge and their

group charged down the path as fast as the horses could gallop, following the tracks into the forest ahead.

The group eventually discovered an old covered wagon parked to the side of the path. A small chimney poked out of the wagon's roof. The wagon's mule was resting and tied to a nearby tree.

"Look at the tracks!" Alex said and pointed to the ground. The bird tracks led right up to the back of the wagon. It had bird foot–shaped spurs around its wheels—the wagon was leaving bird prints as it traveled down the path! It was an incredibly clever way to cover one's tracks.

"Tradesman?" Jack called out. "Is that you in there?"

All was silent at first. Then a hurried shuffle came from inside the wagon and it rocked from side to side. The top half of the wagon's door burst open and the Traveling Tradesman peeked outside.

"Are you a friend or a foe?" the Tradesman asked. He was an elderly man with a long gray beard, tattered clothing, and a wandering eye. He had aged a bit since the last time the twins saw him, but he was just as kooky as ever.

"Friends!" Conner happily exclaimed. "Old friends, actually! Do you remember us?"

The Tradesman studied their faces.

"My boy, I remember every trade I have ever made," the Tradesman said. "But my mind has grown weary in my old age, and the faces attached have been lost in my memory."

Jack, Goldilocks, and the twins climbed down from their horses and walked closer so he could view them better.

"You helped us escape the Troll and Goblin Territory a year ago," Alex said. "We met you in the dungeons and you traded your freedom for ours. You told us about the Wishing Spell."

The Tradesman stroked his beard, brushing crumbs off of it. He must have been in the middle of a meal.

"Ah yes," he said with one squinted eye. "I do admit a small sprinkling of familiarity sweeping through me. I wish I had a memory of *you*," he said to Goldilocks. "But *you*—I think I remember *you*," he said to Jack.

"It's been a long time since we were last face-to-face," Jack said. "Perhaps you remember a lad you traded magic beans to in exchange for a cow?"

The Tradesman's eyes and mouth grew wide with delight. "Well, I'll be darned as a legless goat," he said and clapped his hands together. "If it isn't Jack, my favorite customer!"

Jack happily nodded up at him. "It's me, old man!" he said. "It's good to see you again!"

"Come on in, my boy!" the Tradesman said and opened the lower half of the wagon door. "I've just made some pheasant pudding!"

He disappeared in his wagon and the others took that as their cue to follow him inside.

The small wagon was very cramped. A bed was pushed in the back, a tiny table was in the center, and the interior was lined with cabinets and shelves and cages. Canteens, brooms, buckets, daggers, and more were displayed on the shelves and in the cabinets. The twins knew the objects most likely held some gimmicky value and were waiting to be traded. Geese, ducks, and pigs were locked in the cages—no doubt what the Tradesman had profited from his recent trades.

"Have a seat, have a seat," the Tradesman said. Jack, Goldilocks, and the twins forced themselves around the table. The Tradesman handed them each a plate of his pheasant pudding (which was bits and pieces of unplucked birds floating in mysterious gravy) and a loaf of stale bread. The twins had to hold their noses so they didn't become sick.

"So what brings you to my neck of the woods, old boy?" the Tradesman asked Jack with a pat on the back.

"We've been searching for you, actually," Jack said.

"And to what do I owe the honor of being the subject of such a quest?" the Tradesman said.

Conner had to replay this sentence in his head before he understood what the Tradesman was asking. Jack cautiously looked to the others before confessing.

"I was wondering if you had any more magic beans?" he asked. "Like the ones you gave to me as a boy."

The Tradesman's good eye darted around the room. He was honestly surprised by the request.

"Why would you need *more* magic beans?" he asked. "Surely the first batch gave you enough adventure for a lifetime."

“Indeed they did,” Jack said. “It’s not an adventure we’re after but a way back to the giant’s castle. The beanstalk has been removed and we are hoping to grow another one.”

The Tradesman’s good eye studied each of their faces. “But why would you need to revisit the giant’s castle at a time like this?” he asked.

The group looked across the table at one another. Alex decided they didn’t have time to beat around the bush and got straight to the point.

“Have you ever heard of the Wand of Wonderment?” Alex asked.

“The Wand of Wonderment?” the Tradesman asked.

Conner began explaining. “It’s a Wand that you build out of the six most prized possessions of the six most hated people in the world.”

The Tradesman raised a hand to silence him. “Young man, I’ve known what the Wand of Wonderment is for longer than you’ve been alive,” he said. “I just find it hard to comprehend why *that* would be at the top of your agenda, things being as they are.”

“That’s just the thing, Mr. Tradesman—if I may call you Mr. Tradesman,” Alex said. “We’re trying to build it so we can fix the way things are now. We’re trying to stop the Enchantress, and it’s the only way we know how.”

The wagon went silent. Everyone sat on edge, questioning Alex’s decision to blurt out the truth. Would spilling the beans get them closer to obtaining magical ones?

The Tradesman sat back in his chair and stroked his beard, gazing back and forth between Alex and Conner. “I remember you now,” he said softly. “I don’t recall the exact whereabouts or whenabouts, but I do remember the faces of two youngsters on an extraordinary quest. They were so ambitious in their pursuit, but they were completely selfless in their attempt—it wasn’t glory they were after but harmony, rather. I decided to help them because I knew our paths would cross again one day.”

The twins didn’t know what to say. His saving them had been such a kind gesture it still humbled them.

“I guess your intuition was right,” Conner said. “Only now we’re trying to save the world.”

The Tradesman observed them for only a moment more. He stood up and went to one of the cabinets. He dug through it for a while, pulling out

strangely shaped plates and goblets and tools and gadgets before finally removing a small brown bag.

The Tradesman poured the contents of the little bag onto the table, and the twins found themselves staring down at three beans. They were round and wide like lima beans but were black and bounced livelily on the table.

“Magic beans!” Jack said excitedly. “You still have some!”

“They’re the last I have in my possession,” the Tradesman said. “They aren’t easy to come across, either. Magic beans have to be plucked from a plant that grows in ground fertilized by unicorn manure and watered with the tears of a witch. But they’re my gift to you.”

Everyone sat up in their seats. “Are you sure?” Goldilocks said. “We were prepared to pay you.”

She pulled a handful of diamonds from out of the side of her boot.

“Goldie, where did you get those?” Jack asked.

“I stole them from Red when she wasn’t looking—she won’t miss them,” Goldilocks said. “I was assuming we would have to make a trade of some kind.”

The Tradesman scooped the beans up, put them back into the bag, and handed it to Jack.

“Consider it my little contribution to the people brave enough to take on the evil Enchantress,” the Tradesman said.

“That was easy,” Conner said. He couldn’t believe the luck they had so far. “Maybe making this wand won’t be so difficult after all.”

“There will be plenty of dangers to be found, I’m afraid,” the Tradesman said. “Especially when pursuing the Wand of Wonderment. I would know. I tried building it for myself when I was a young man.”

“You did?” Alex asked, unable to contain her surprise. “So does that mean it’s real?”

“Oh yes, it’s very real, I can assure you,” he told her. “Much like the Wishing Spell you were after previously, many fools have attempted to create it themselves and have died trying. It was during my own pursuit I became the tradesman you see today. I discovered selling trinkets of interest was more profitable than searching for them.”

“Do you know what we should expect, then?” Conner asked.

“I can only imagine,” the Tradesman said. “Just remember that even the tamest of places will surprise you with what is lurking in its shadows—

and these beans are no exception! Although the giant is dead, there are still dangers waiting for you at his castle."

Conner gulped loudly. "Do you care to specify?" he asked.

"Young man, if it was in my nature to be specific I wouldn't be able to look in two directions at all times," the Tradesman said and his good eye glared at Conner.

"Well, we can't thank you enough," Jack said. "Kindness is a rare thing to come across in the forest."

"But it's I who should be thanking you," the Tradesman said. "After giving you those beans my sales went through the roof! You gave me my career, old boy! You'll always be like a son to me, Jack."

Conner cleared his throat. "The kind of son you rip off in a trade that sends him on a life-threatening adventure?" he asked.

The Tradesman rethought his words. "More like a nephew, then," he said. He looked through the wagon door at the darkening evening sky. "Where did the time go? You must excuse me now. I must be off before sunset. I never stay more than a day in one place—sake of the trade, sake of the name." He winked with his good eye, although none could figure out who it was meant for. "Good luck, my friends."

Jack, Goldilocks, and the twins left the wagon and found their horses. The Tradesman hitched up his mule and rode off into the forest just as the sun began to set. The twins wondered what very special circumstance would be required for them to cross paths with him again.

"What do you think he meant when he said there are other dangers waiting for us at the giant's castle?" Conner asked. "The giant didn't leave behind a crazy widow or anything, did he?"

"It's been so long since I was there," Jack said, climbing astride Porridge. "The giant was the only terrifying thing I can remember being in the castle. That, of course, and the golden harp's singing."

The twins and Goldilocks remounted their horses and rode off in the opposite direction of the Tradesman, heading back to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom. They rode the entire night and arrived the next afternoon to find amazing progress had been made on the flying ship.

Red, Froggy, and the third Little Pig were huddled around the blueprints.

“Did you find the Tradesman?” Froggy asked as soon as he saw them arrive.

Conner held up the small bag of magic beans. “Our first of hopefully many victories,” he said. “By the way, Froggy, after seeing what that guy ate, I’ll never pick on you about lily-pad tea again!”

“This looks incredible!” Alex said. More than half the ship looked ready.

“It should be completed the day after tomorrow,” the third Little Pig said.

Jack was hesitant to give his own praise. “It looks so much *bigger* than what my plans proposed,” he said.

“Yes, about that…” Froggy said with an apologetic laugh.

“Queen Red made a few revisions to your plans,” the third Little Pig said.

“Revisions?” Jack said and looked at Red.

“Well, I figured since I was going to be traveling with you I would need my own chambers,” Red said matter-of-factly. “I added a lower deck for me and my things—but don’t worry, there’s plenty of room for the rest of you on the upper deck.”

Jack sighed and rubbed his eyes. Goldilocks looked like she was going to strangle someone, so the twins decided to excuse themselves before she did. They could hear Goldilocks and Red arguing as they climbed the stairs to their bedrooms.

The sun was about to set on another day and the twins fell asleep the instant they made contact with their beds. They knew the days ahead would be difficult, but the Wand of Wonderment had finally been confirmed as a real tool for overthrowing the Enchantress, so they focused on that and let that triumphant feeling ease them to sleep.

At an hour or so after midnight, Conner awoke with a troubling sensation. He couldn’t fight off the feeling he was being watched as he slept. His eyes fluttered open and as they slowly focused his heart dropped. Standing at the foot of his bed, intently staring at him, was a *woman*.

She was beautiful and transparent. She had long, flowing hair with a single rose behind her ear. She wore a long nightgown under a robe that was tied at the waist. Although Conner was certain he had never seen her before, she looked oddly familiar.

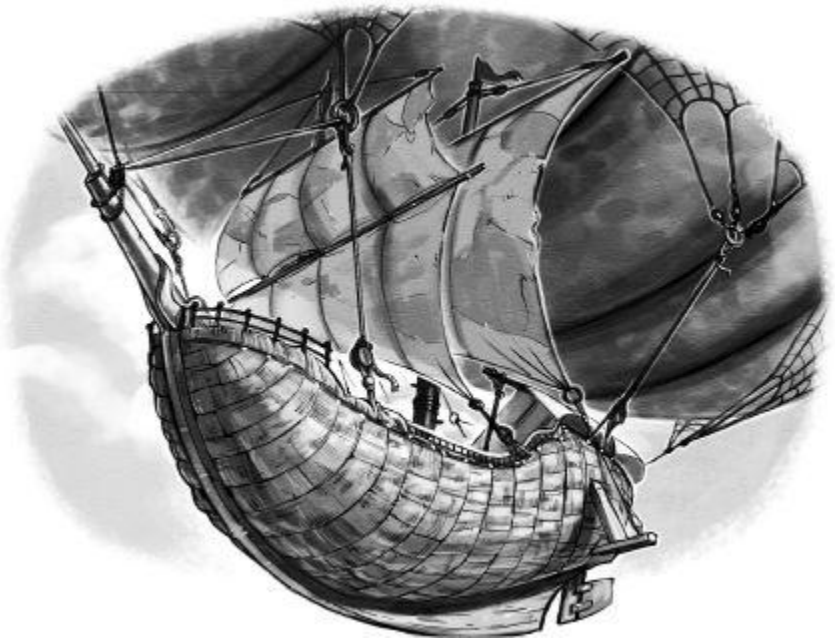
“W-w-w-who are you?” Conner stuttered.

The woman didn’t respond. She glided to the window and pointed to the land in the distance. She looked back at him with a grave expression.

“W-w-w-what do you want?” Conner muttered.

The woman said nothing. She held her somber stare and slowly disappeared.

Conner’s jaw fell open. There was no denying it—he had just seen a *ghost*.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FLIGHT OF THE *GRANNY*

Alex couldn't find her brother anywhere. "Have you seen Conner?" she asked Froggy. "He wasn't at breakfast this morning and he isn't in the courtyard."

"I haven't seen him since yesterday," Froggy said. "Have you checked his room? Maybe he fell ill?"

Alex hoped this wasn't the case, as they were on the eve of their expedition. She climbed the stairs to his bedroom to check on him, praying he wasn't sick.

"Conner?" Alex said and knocked on the door. "Are you in here?"

There was no response, so she twisted the handle and pushed open the door without an invitation. Conner was sitting straight up on his bed. He stared off into the distance, lost in thought. A small dribble of drool spilled from the corner of his mouth.

"Are you feeling all right?" Alex asked.

"What?" Conner said with a jump. He hadn't noticed the door open.

"You don't look well," Alex said. "Are you sick?"

Conner had to think about it. "No," he decided. "At least, I don't think I am." His gaze drifted off again toward his bedroom window.

"Then what's the matter?" Alex said. "You look like you've just seen a __"

Conner's face jerked in her direction. He looked absolutely horrified and didn't make a sound. Alex's figure of speech had accidentally uncovered the truth.

"Wait a second," Alex said. "Did you actually see a ghost?"

Conner's eyes darted around the room. He didn't know how to explain.

"It happened last night—I woke up and it was standing there just staring at me!" Conner proclaimed with bombastic gestures.

"Who was staring at you?" Alex asked.

"A ghost!" he said. "She was *right there*!"

"I was being sarcastic!" Alex said. "Are you telling me you saw an actual *ghost*?"

“Yes!” Conner said and placed his hand on his face. “I mean—she was see-through, quiet, and disappeared into thin air—all signs point to it!”

“Are you sure you weren’t dreaming?” Alex said.

“You have to wake up from a dream,” he said. “And I’ve been wide awake ever since it happened! I’ve been too afraid to move.”

Alex tried to come up with a logical explanation but she couldn’t. His hysterics made it hard for her to doubt him.

“Maybe this castle is haunted?” she suggested.

“Who haunts a new castle? That’s like holding a grudge against a baby!” Conner said. “It was so strange. She *waited* for me to see her. And once I did she went over to the window and just pointed outside. It was the creepiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“And you have no idea who she was?” Alex asked.

“No clue,” he said and shook his head. “But what’s even stranger is that she looked familiar. I could swear I’ve seen her before.”

Alex took a seat on Conner’s bed. Their days were already full of mystery; the last thing they needed to add to the mix was a ghost sighting. A moment later, Red’s handmaiden knocked on the open door and peeked her head inside.

“There you two are,” the handmaiden said. “Her Majesty is looking for you two. She wants to see you in her chambers.”

The handmaiden hurried away as soon as she was finished giving her message.

“I wouldn’t mention the ghost to anyone if I were you,” Alex said. “I think everyone has enough on their plates as it is.”

Conner couldn’t have agreed more. “Trust me, the last thing I want people to know is that I’m seeing dead people,” he said.

Alex sat with her brother until he gained the courage to leave his bed. He got dressed and the twins walked across the castle to meet Red in her chambers.

Queen Red’s new bedroom was twice the size of the twins’ rental house. There was a diamond chandelier hanging from the ceiling; large, colorful, and cushiony furniture lined the room; and the biggest four-poster bed the twins had ever seen—large enough to sleep ten comfortably—was on its own platform in the back of the room.

“Yoo-hoo, we’re in here!” Red called from a doorway to the side.

The twins followed her voice and found themselves stepping into a long hall of mirrors. It was almost as big as the bedroom itself. The hall was incredibly bright and had several chandeliers and wooden floors, and weeping willow trees were painted on the walls.

"This is beautiful, Red!" Alex said. "Is this your ballroom?"

"Ballroom?" Red said with a laugh. "Good heavens, no. This is my closet."

The twins did a double take. In between every two mirrors was a large chest of drawers built into the wall. A collection of golden chests lined the far side of the room. Thousands and thousands of clothes and accessories must have been kept in here.

Red was standing on a stool facing a mirror, with a large gray fur coat around her shoulders. Her handmaiden took measurements and put pins along the sides of it, fitting it perfectly to the slender queen.

"Nice coat," Conner said.

"Thank you!" Red said. "It's for our voyage. I figured it might get chilly flying around the sky, especially in the Northern Mountains, where the Snow Queen lives. Did either of you bring a proper coat?"

Alex and Conner shook their heads.

"Luckily I'm always thinking ahead," Red said. "I had two coats whipped up for you with the extra material."

The Handmaiden tossed two fur coats to the twins and they tried them on. They weren't quite as stylishly cut as the one Red was getting fitted for, but they would do just fine. The twins couldn't deny it was a very kind gesture on Red's part—she kept surprising them.

"Thanks, Red," Alex said.

Conner looked down at the coat suspiciously. "What is this?" he said. "Or should I ask what *was* this?"

"It used to be the rug in the library," Red said.

Alex and Conner suddenly grew very uncomfortable.

"Are you telling me that we're wearing *the Big Bad Wolf*?" Conner asked.

"Yes," Red said, without a crumb of remorse. "Soft, wasn't he?"

The twins grew very stiff, as if what they were wearing was still alive.

"I don't know what to say—thank you so much for thinking of us," Alex said through her teeth.

“No trouble at all,” Red said and stepped off the stool. “Now step up and have it fitted properly. Saving the world is not an excuse to wear ill-fitting clothes.”

Alex was first to step on the stool and get her coat tailored by the handmaiden.

“Speaking of things that used to be alive,” Conner said, “I was wondering, has anyone ever died in this castle?”

Alex shot him a sharp look. Conner didn’t make eye contact with her.

“No, thank heavens,” Red said. “Why would you ask such a question?”

Conner shrugged innocently. “No reason,” he said. “If someone had, though, would you even know about it?”

Red glared at him peculiarly. “Are you making plans to be the first?” she asked.

“Of course not,” Conner said. “I was just curious. Forget I mentioned it.”

The handmaiden finished pinning Alex’s coat, and Conner was next. Goldilocks entered the closet a few moments later. Her eyes had to adjust from the light.

“Where am I?” Goldilocks said, shielding her face from the chandeliers.

“You’re in my closet,” Red said with an eye roll. “Poor thing has been living like an animal for so long she can’t even recognize one,” she whispered to the twins.

“For a moment I thought I had stepped onto the sun,” Goldilocks said. “The ship is almost complete and we’ll be loading it soon. We need a chest. Froggy said I could find one here.”

“Did he?” Red said, a little annoyed Froggy would point Goldilocks in the direction of her room. “He was mistaken, I’m afraid. All the chests up here are full.”

Goldilocks ignored her. She saw the line of them in the back of the hall and headed toward one. “Perfect!” Goldilocks said. She opened it and dumped a pile of high-heeled shoes out of it.

“Excuse me!? I need that!” Red said.

“Well, *we* need it now,” Goldilocks said and started dragging the empty chest out of the closet.

“For what?” Red said.

“We’re going to fill it with supplies,” Goldilocks said. “Weapons, lanterns, ropes—things we *actually* need for the trip. Your shoes will just have to be homeless for the time being.”

Goldilocks dragged the chest out of sight. Red looked after her for a moment with a puzzled expression on her face. “Sometimes when I talk to her I feel as if I’m not speaking to another woman, but to another species altogether,” she said.

That afternoon the twins decided to go with Jack to plant the magic beans. Jack figured it was best to plant the beans in the same soil as the previous beanstalk, so they walked through the village and headed to his former home just on the outskirts of town. Jack carried a shovel over his shoulder and held the bag of magic beans tightly in his hand.

“The ship is coming along splendidly,” Jack said. “The men are finishing up some final touches, but it’ll be ready by sunset.”

“When do we leave?” Conner asked.

“Tonight at midnight,” Jack said.

The twins were half excited and half nervous to hear this.

“We have five places to stop—six including wherever the Enchantress keeps her most prized possession,” Alex counted. “Where are we going first?”

“It’s important that our course isn’t predictable,” Jack said. “I reckon by our second or third stop word will reach the Enchantress about our little escapade—we have to keep her guessing where we’ll be headed. We should start with the Snow Queen first, begin our adventure with a bang. Then we’ll go south to the wicked stepmother’s estate. By then the beanstalk should be grown and we’ll come back here for the giant’s castle. Then we’ll head northeast to collect pieces of the Evil Queen’s mirror and then south again for the Sea Witch’s jewels.”

“Oh, is that all?” Conner said sarcastically.

“Hopefully we’ll figure out what Ezmia’s most prized possession is before we get to the Sea Witch,” Alex said.

“Yeah, hopefully,” Conner said.

They walked for a bit longer and Jack’s old house appeared in the distance—both of them. A wooden shack Jack lived in with his mother

when they were poor sat in front of a large and elegant manor they had built after acquiring the riches from the giant.

Jack stopped walking when he saw his old homes.

“What’s wrong?” Alex asked, looking back at him.

“Nothing,” he said quietly. “I just haven’t been back in a really long time.”

“We know how you feel,” Conner said. “Alex and I used to walk home every day from school and pass our old house. It used to make us so sad—”

“That’s just the thing,” Jack said, and a small grin grew on his nostalgic face. “I was expecting to be sad—I was expecting it to make me feel blue, but I feel quite the opposite. Every minute I remember spending here was a minute missing or worrying about Goldilocks. I don’t suppose I could consider anyplace home without her.”

He continued walking with a cheerful hop in his step, patting the twins on the shoulders as he passed them. Alex smiled to herself, knowing how happy Goldilocks would be to hear this.

Jack walked to the edge of a large hole in the ground that the previous beanstalk had grown out of.

“I’ll plant the beans here,” Jack said. He dug a small hole and dropped the three magic beans into the ground. “The last beanstalk took less than a day to grow.”

“Should someone keep an eye on it while we’re away? To make sure nothing disturbs its growth?” Alex asked.

Jack contemplated this for a moment. “I have the perfect person for the job,” he said and headed toward the manor.

Before he reached the large home, two windows in the front of the house burst open. Standing behind them was the beautiful and golden magic harp. She sang with a soprano voice and the strings connected to her back played along with her voice.

“Oh, another day has come at last,
What once was today is now the past,
As the sun slowly sets and disappears,
I’ve been at this window for too many years—Jack!”

“Hello, Harper!” Jack said, happy to see his old friend.

“Oh my goodness gracious!” the harp said, completely overwhelmed. “Is it really you, or are my eyes deceiving me?!”

“I’m here, Harper,” Jack said bashfully. “I’m so sorry I haven’t written or visited. I couldn’t risk being seen.”

The harp instantly burst into a triumphant song.

“Oh, Jack, my Jack, the Jack is back,
You almost gave this harp a heart attack,
But now I no longer need to be concerned,
For Jack, my Jack, the Jack has finally returned.”

The twins couldn’t help but applaud—she was a one-woman show.

“I remember you two!” the harp said. “It’s been ages since I last saw you!”

“It’s been a year,” Conner said.

“Only a year?” the harp said in amazement. “I could have sworn it was decades! Time goes by so much slower when you have nothing to look at but grass and an old shack and only the squirrels to keep you company.”

One of the harp’s eyes began twitching. Alex and Conner had felt sorry for her when Jack lived in the house with her—they couldn’t imagine what complete isolation had been like for her.

The harp’s strings played the opening chords of a sad ballad.

“A lonely, lonely life I lead,
As lonely, lonely as a seed,
A tree with lonely, lonely leaves,
But just how lonely no one believes!”

Alex and Conner clapped again for her, though not as vigorously.

“But you look great!” Conner said, trying to break the sad tension.

“I’m sorry you’ve been so lonely, Harper. Truly I am. If it had been safe to come back to visit you, I would have,” Jack said.

“All is forgotten, dear,” the harp said. “Today is a happy day! You’ve come home at last! I’m sad to tell you the house is an absolute mess inside. I would have tidied up had I known you were coming back home—and if I had legs.”

“I’m not coming back, I’m afraid,” Jack said. “We’re just passing through.”

“Oh, I see,” the harp said. Her strings played a sad little melody as her spirits sank.

“But we were wondering if you could do us a favor,” Jack said.

The harp’s tempo sped up as her hopes were raised again.

“A favor?” the harp asked and her eyes fluttered. “What’s your request, my boy? Is there a party you wish for me to perform at? A celebration you’d like me to serenade? A funeral you’d like me to give a farewell aria at?”

“Not exactly,” Jack said sheepishly. “I just planted some magic beans. Would you mind keeping an eye on the beanstalk that grows while we’re away for a few days?”

The harp’s hopeful chords came to an abrupt stop.

“Pardon?” the harp asked and her eye began to twitch more severely.

“We’re hoping you can keep an eye on the beanstalk,” Conner reiterated.

The harp’s nostrils flared and the eyebrow above her twitching eye rose so high it almost touched her hairline.

“I have performed for kings and queens and aristocrats!” the harp said, horribly insulted “And you’re asking me to *watch a plant grow for you*?!”

The three of them took a couple steps back from her.

“Do you have anything else better to do?” Conner asked. He wasn’t helping matters at all. The harp’s strings started to play a fast and angry theme behind her.

“Harper, are you aware of what’s happening in the world?” Jack asked.

“Unless it’s happened directly in front of this house, I haven’t heard about it,” the harp said and folded her arms.

Jack sighed and rubbed his neck, not knowing where to begin.

“Well, I don’t mean to worry you, but the world is in a bit of a crisis,” he said. “We’re going on a trip that will hopefully restore it. So if you could keep an eye on the beanstalk as it grows, we would be so appreciative.”

The harp snorted and looked away from them. “I suppose this is my new life now,” she said over-dramatically. “The former renowned entertainer for the royal and rich is now a *plant sitter.* My, how far I’ve fallen.”

A clever smile appeared on Jack's face as an idea came to him. "In exchange," Jack said, "I'll have you moved to Queen Red Riding Hood's Castle. You could perform for the queen and all her servants all day long."

Conner laughed into his fist, poorly disguising it as a cough. The harp tried her best to conceal her intrigue, but it was obviously the most exciting proposal she had received in a decade. A symphony of exhilaration was coming from her strings.

"I will have to consider," the harp said with half a smile, but they all knew her answer. "I will let you know if I decide to move into Queen Red's castle when you return, but for now I'll keep an eye on your beanstalk. *Now if you'll excuse me, I must practice my scales!*"

The harp quickly shut the window and went to work on her vocal exercises.

"Way to go," Conner said and patted Jack on the back.

"Aside from rescuing her from the giant, you probably just made her century!" Alex said.

Jack chuckled to himself. "I'm not sure who I feel worse for," he said. "Harper, for leaving her alone for so long—or Red, for sending Harper to live with her."

The twins laughed and the three headed back to the castle.

The twins packed all their things and met the others downstairs in the courtyard at midnight. Conner was too scared to be by himself, so he didn't let Alex out of his sight. He was afraid if he was alone the ghost would pay him another visit.

The flying ship had come a very long way from the sketches in the library. The enormous vessel filled the entire courtyard, made of woven pieces of wood—it looked like a giant ship-shaped basket. The carpenters had the ship on its side and were attaching the balloon and sails to the top of it.

"Oh, Granny! The balloon and sails look terrific!" Red said. She was right: Although it was deflated, the twins couldn't deny that Granny and the

Little Old Woman had stitched together an impressively durable balloon. In fact, the balloon looked sturdier than the actual ship.

“Oh, thank you, sweetheart,” Granny said. “We were so honored to be a part of it.”

“Who’s a tart?” the Little Old Woman asked.

Once the carpenters were finished attaching the balloon and sails, they ignited a large lamp-like object in the center of the ship. Carefully, with Jack’s commands, the balloon and sails were filled with hot air and the ship was pulled upright.

Goldilocks dragged the chest she had filled with supplies onto the ship. Once she climbed aboard she was surprised to discover the entire deck had been filled with dozens of other chests and trunks.

“What is all of this?” Goldilocks called down.

“Those are Queen Red’s supplies,” the third Little Pig said.

“What supplies?” Goldilocks said with an irritated glare.

“Oh, relax, Goldie,” Red yelled up to her. “I wasn’t sure how long we’d be gone for so I made sure to bring plenty of wardrobe options.”

Goldilocks visibly bit back her frustration and made sure everything was properly tied down for their launch. Froggy hadn’t brought anything onto the ship except a tall stack of his favorite library books.

“Just something to pass the time,” Froggy said. “Everyone is welcome to share if they’d like.”

It was getting later and anticipation was rising. The twins and Jack joined Froggy and Goldilocks aboard the ship.

“Where’s Red?” Jack asked after doing a head count.

“Just a second, just a second,” Red said. She had quickly run back to her chambers to change for the third time that night—she wanted her outfit to be perfect for their maiden voyage. A basket hung from her arm like a purse and she pulled out a fancy bottle of champagne from inside.

Red cleared her throat. “I would like to make an announcement,” she said. *“Would you mind?”*

Before he could agree to it, Red stepped on top of the third Little Pig so she could get a nicer view of all the carpenters in the room.

“Make it quick, Red, we have to be as far away as possible by sunrise,” Goldilocks called down to her. Red waved her off like she was a hovering insect.

“I wanted to thank all of the men, women, and pigs alike for working tirelessly around the clock to build this ship. You have made your kingdom and your queen very proud. It is an honor to be among citizens of your *courage*, *strength*, *bravery*, and *spirit*!” Red said, and the courtyard erupted in applause.

“It wouldn’t be a proper launch without a proper christening,” she went on, raising the bottle. “I’d like to dedicate this ship in the name of my grandmother. May it forever be known as the HMS *Granny*.”

She smacked the bottle on the side of the ship and it burst into a fizzy explosion. Granny smiled, touched by her granddaughter’s dedication.

Red wiped her hand on the third Little Pig. “Now someone clean that up, please,” she ordered and finally boarded the ship.

“Everyone brace yourselves for takeoff!” Jack shouted. He pulled a lever near the flame and it grew four times in size. Goldilocks and the twins gripped the banister. Froggy took hold of the large steering wheel. He gulped and his thin frog legs trembled, but he was ready.

The *Granny*, as Red had just declared it, smoothly rose higher and higher through the courtyard. The carpenters cheered from below. The twins held their breath, hoping nothing would go wrong on their first ascent. Within moments they were rising past the tops of the castle’s highest towers and into the open night sky.

“We did it! We did it!” the twins shouted. “We’re flying! We’re flying!”

It was so peaceful and serene. A cool night breeze blew past them as the Red Riding Hood Kingdom grew smaller and smaller.

Froggy delicately turned the steering wheel and the sails positioned the ship in a northern direction. The twins couldn’t fight off the proud smiles they shared with the others. Their vision had become a reality, and their flight had officially begun.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE SNOW QUEEN

The *Granny* sailed steadily through the night sky. They had been flying for a few hours now and the initial excitement had worn off and been replaced with anticipation for the journey ahead. They were flying somewhere above the Northern Kingdom, and the snowy Northern Mountains came into view on the horizon.

The farther north they traveled, the colder it became. The twins were so thankful Red had given them fur coats to wear, despite whom the fur used to belong to.

Froggy was still clutching the steering wheel. He looked like a little boy—too excited to let it go. Red leaned on the banister facing west. She kept looking over her shoulder, as if to ask someone a question.

"Are you all right, my love?" Froggy asked her.

"Yes, darling, I'll be fine," Red said. "I keep thinking of things for my handmaiden to do for me and forget she's not here. I forgot what it was like to go without *help*."

Jack and Goldilocks were seated near the front of the ship. Goldilocks sharpened her sword and Jack sharpened his axe as the twins joined them.

"So what can you tell us about the Snow Queen?" Conner said. "On a scale of kitten to tiger, what kind of danger are we talking?"

"It's hard to say," Jack said. "The Snow Queen has been out of the public eye for so long—no one has seen her in decades."

"Really?" Alex asked, always eager for a good story. "I'm not very familiar with her."

Jack went into full-throttle storytelling mode, dramatically retelling the events that had made the Snow Queen a household name.

"Many years ago, the Snow Queen was just a weather witch from deep in the mountains. She befriended the king of the Northern Kingdom by granting him wishes and gained his trust by giving him prophecies about the kingdom. The king made her his royal advisor, but she was evil and secretly plotted to take over the kingdom for herself. Eventually, she overthrew the king and imprisoned the entire kingdom in an everlasting

winter. All the trees and plants, most of the animals, and some of the people died—not able to survive the cold," Jack said.

"So what happened?" Conner asked.

"Wise Prince White, Snow White's grandfather, rallied up an army to overthrow the Snow Queen," Jack said. "They took back their kingdom and banished the evil Snow Queen to live the rest of her days deep in the Northern Mountains."

"Whatever became of her?" Alex asked.

"Some people say she started an army of snowmen and is waiting for the right time to unleash them. Others say she was so distraught after losing the kingdom she cried until her eyes froze and they melted away. Nothing is certain, because no one ever saw her again, but her icy wrath still sends chills down people's spines whenever her name is mentioned," Jack said.

"So how do people know she's alive?" Alex asked.

"Oh, she's alive, believe me," Goldilocks said. "The Snow Queen sends vengeful blizzards through the kingdom when she's feeling particularly angry—just to let people know she's still around."

Alex and Conner gulped at the same time.

"And this scepter of hers that we need," Conner said. "I'm guessing we're going to have to steal it, right? She's not just going to hand it over willingly."

In response, Jack and Goldilocks simply continued sharpening their weapons.

"Speaking of cold," Goldilocks said and gestured to Red, who had been staring at the four of them for some time. Red quickly turned away from them, embarrassed to be caught.

A week ago, Red had been certain she was in love with Froggy. But as soon as Jack returned to her life, all the old feelings she had for him slowly started to return as well. She tried to fight them off, telling herself it was just her mind playing tricks on her heart, but tonight, as she watched him tell the twins about the Snow Queen, she couldn't deny that feelings had definitely resurfaced.

Froggy, despite his current state, was perfect for her, and everyone she knew agreed. She loved him with all of her heart—but wasn't that how she felt about Jack, too? Could she be in love with two people at once? Or

worse—could she be in love with one of them and just in denial about how she felt toward the other?

But which was which? What would it take for her to be certain? All the thinking gave Red a headache.

"It looks like things are about to get bumpy for us," Froggy said to Red.

"Excuse me?" Red asked in shock, terrified he could read her mind.

Froggy cleared his throat to get Jack's and Goldilocks's attention. "I don't mean to put a damper on the night, but I believe we may be headed to a certain death unless we do something about it."

Everyone's head shot to the front of the ship. The *Granny* was headed straight into the sharp and snowy peaks of the Northern Mountains—and unless they gained altitude quickly, *they were going to crash.*

Red sighed to herself, relieved Froggy hadn't been referring to her thoughts, but her relief turned into a series of screams as she realized what was happening.

Jack leaped up and pulled on the lever by the flame. The flame grew and the *Granny* rose, but not high enough. The mountain peaks were getting closer, certain to rip a hole right through the ship. Jack pulled on the lever as hard as he could, but the flame was as big as it was going to get. The *Granny* wasn't getting any higher.

"Oh no!" Alex said.

"What are we going to do?" Conner asked.

Goldilocks looked around the deck. She ran over to the trunks and chests Red had insisted on bringing and sliced through the ropes that held them down with her sword. One by one, Goldilocks began chucking the chests and trunks overboard.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" Red said. She ran over to her beloved items and threw herself on top of them.

"Don't tempt me to throw you overboard, too!" Goldilocks said.

"These are my things! You can't just toss them overboard! I need them!" Red yelled. They both grabbed on to the handles of a chest and played tug-of-war with it. Goldilocks managed to get it over the edge of the ship, but Red wouldn't let it go.

"Red, you need to listen to me," Goldilocks said, looking her directly in the eyes. "You've got too much baggage! You need to let it go or we'll

crash!”

Red froze. Had *Goldilocks* heard her thoughts moments before? Had she been thinking out loud and not realized it?

“Red, we can’t go on with all of this weighing us down! Do you understand?” Goldilocks pleaded with her.

“I have to let go?” Red said to herself. “I have to let go…” She looked up at Jack, down to the chest, back at Jack, and slowly let the chest slip out of her grasp and fall to the earth below. She watched it fall until she couldn’t see it anymore.

Goldilocks wasted no time. She eagerly (almost too eagerly) began hoisting all of Red’s trunks and chests over the side of the ship. Jack and the twins joined her. The more they tossed overboard, the higher the *Granny* rose.

“Almost… almost…” Froggy said. His green hands were almost white from clutching the steering wheel. He was doing his best to navigate the *Granny* around the sharp peaks, but there was still one more to fly over—and it was exceptionally high.

There was only one more trunk to get rid of. It took Jack, Goldilocks, and the twins all their strength to push it up and over the side of the ship. They flung it over just in time and the *Granny* glided over the mountain peak, inches away from its jagged edge.

Jack, Goldilocks, and the twins fell to the deck floor—their hearts were pounding and they were breathing heavily. Red was leaning on the banister, her eyes fixed on the ground, trying to see where her things had landed, but they were too high up for her to tell.

“I need to let go…” Red quietly sniffled to herself. *“I need to let go.”*

After a few moments, the four caught their breath and got to their feet. Red was devastated and wiped away tiny tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes.

“I’m so sorry we had to throw all of your clothes overboard,” Alex said.

“Clothes?” Red said. “Oh no, those weren’t my clothes—those were just my hats and jewelry. All my clothes are packed in the trunks downstairs.”

Everyone glared at her as if she were responsible for everything wrong in the world.

“Does this ship have a plank?!” Goldilocks asked. She jumped toward Red—Jack and the twins had to hold her back.

“My dear, for your safety I think it’s best if you go to bed,” Froggy told Red. She didn’t argue and climbed down the steps to the lower deck.

The *Granny* bobbed gracefully above the rocky Northern Mountains. The sun had risen hours ago but no one could tell through the thick, cloudy sky. The ground looked menacing below. There were no trees or villages, only snow. The twins couldn’t imagine anything living this far north—anything except a Snow Queen.

The wind suddenly picked up and the ship rocked harder than it ever had. The cold had become almost unbearable, and the twins wrapped their coats even tighter around themselves.

“We’re getting closer,” Jack said. “Look!”

He pointed to the dark sky in the distance. Bright northern lights circled into a vortex above a particularly jagged cluster of mountain peaks.

“We found her! She should be just under those lights,” Goldilocks said.

“Charlie, let’s put the *Granny* down gently over there,” Jack said and gestured to a large snow bed they were approaching. Froggy nodded and steered the ship in its direction. Jack lowered the lever by the flame and the ship descended, settling onto the snowy ground.

Red poked her head up from the lower deck. “Are we here?” she said with a big yawn, just waking up from a nap.

“We’ll travel the rest of the way by foot,” Jack said. “A large ship hovering over her lair may cause some attention.”

Goldilocks opened the trunk she had brought onto the ship. She and Jack began tucking away as many weapons as possible: daggers in their boots, knives in their belts, rope around their waists. They both took a lantern and handed one to the twins.

“Are you two sure you’re ready for this?” Jack asked. He was very businesslike, but the twins could sense a paternal hesitation in his voice.

Alex and Conner took a deep breath and nodded. “We’re ready,” they said in unison.

“I don’t think I packed any *snow heels*; I may have to sit this one out,” Red said.

“Great,” Jack said. It was the best news he had heard all day. “Charlie, you should stay with the ship. If we’re not back in a day, come looking for us.”

“Yes, sir,” Froggy said.

Jack looked at Goldilocks and the twins. “All right,” he said. “Follow me.”

They climbed off the ship and headed in the direction of the northern lights. It was hard for Alex and Conner to keep up with Jack and Goldilocks—partially because the snow was hard to walk in and partially because they weren’t used to trekking through the wilderness like Jack and Goldilocks were.

As they continued farther north, the wind became stronger and stronger. It almost knocked them down and the sounds were piercing, like screaming—the Snow Queen’s screaming. Perhaps this was part of that wrathful blizzard they had been warned about.

After a long while of traveling by foot the twins looked up and saw the northern lights circling the sky directly above them. Jack led them into a small opening between two enormous glaciers, and the harsh winds were blocked. It was like walking in a narrow hallway without a ceiling.

“I think it’s this way,” Jack said to his three followers.

They traveled between the glaciers, farther into the mountains of the Snow Queen’s lair. The opening between the glaciers zigzagged through the mountains like an icy labyrinth, twisting and turning every few feet. Alex and Conner couldn’t tell which direction they were walking in anymore. They were afraid they would get lost but saw Goldilocks scraping the glacier wall with a dagger as they traveled, marking the way back out.

They started to hear voices echo through the glacier maze. Jack gestured for them to be as quiet as possible as they walked farther.

The group found themselves entering a large crater in the middle of the mountains. A frozen river circled the bottom like a snowy floor, and a frozen waterfall spilled inside from the mountain above. There were several pillars of ice surrounding the frozen river.

Everything was white so it was hard to make out what they were seeing at first. But as her eyes began to focus, Alex had to stifle a scream. At the base of the frozen waterfall, the ice flowed into a gigantic chair on

which the Snow Queen herself was sitting. They were on the edge of an icy throne room.

Upon seeing her, Jack and Goldilocks dove behind one ice pillar and the twins hid behind another.

The Snow Queen was a tall woman with a large white fur coat, a snowflake crown, and a cloth wrapped around her eyes. Her skin was so pale and frostbitten it was practically blue. She had a very strong jaw and tiny jagged teeth. She clutched a long icicle scepter in one hand, and her other hand was being stroked by something enormous and fluffy kneeling before her… *it was a polar bear.* He blended so well into the rest of the crater the twins had barely noticed him.

"Bear!" Goldilocks gasped. It was the first time the twins had ever seen her *afraid* of anything.

"You're afraid of bears?" Alex whispered to her.

Goldilocks nodded but her eyes never left the polar bear. "Ever since I was a girl and went inside the Three Bears' house by mistake," she said.

The polar bear gently caressed the Snow Queen's hand—a faithful and obedient servant.

"How many people are there outside?" the Snow Queen asked him hoarsely. One of the rumors Jack had told the twins was true; she was definitely blind.

"Thousands and thousands have come today, Your Majesty," the polar bear said in a deep, growly voice.

"What have they come for?" the Snow Queen asked.

"They've come to bow and grovel at your feet and witness your beauty," the polar bear said.

A snide smile came to the Snow Queen's face and a slow, rattling laugh came from deep inside of her.

"Do I still control all the neighboring kingdoms?" the Snow Queen asked.

"All of them, Your Majesty," the bear said. "The whole world is covered in your snowy wrath—just as it was before."

The Snow Queen's smile grew wider. "What gifts does my army have for me today?" she asked.

"I'll call for them, Your Majesty," he said.

The polar bear let out a booming growl. A few moments later another polar bear appeared. He carried two long poles with several pairs of boots tied to them. He raised the poles and lowered them to the ground as he walked, giving the Snow Queen the illusion that dozens of soldiers were marching into the crater.

“My faithful army has returned,” the pleased Snow Queen said. “What have you brought me this time?”

“Jewels, My Queen,” the second polar bear said. He set the poles aside and carefully dropped a handful of average rocks into her hands. “Rubies, diamonds, and sapphires—all Your Majesty’s favorites.”

The Snow Queen gasped. “These are the biggest jewels I’ve ever held!” she said. “You’ve made your queen very proud.”

The polar bears looked to each other, relieved to have pulled off another hoax. The second polar bear retrieved the poles and walked off behind the waterfall, marching the boots along with him.

“Everything she believes is a lie!” Conner whispered to his sister.

“I wonder how long those polar bears have been fooling her for,” Alex whispered back.

“*Pssst,*” Jack said, getting the twins’ attention. “I’m going to distract the bear. The three of you get the scepter.”

They all nodded.

Jack picked up a chunk of ice and threw it to the other side of the crater’s rim. The polar bear jerked his head toward the sound. He scowled, waiting for it to happen again, and then looked back at the Snow Queen when it didn’t.

Jack threw an even bigger chunk of ice in the same direction—the polar bear looked toward it and sniffed the air. He let out a low growl and bared his teeth—he knew they had company.

“What is it?” the Snow Queen asked.

“Nothing, Your Majesty,” the polar bear said. “Please excuse me for a moment.” The polar bear walked off to inspect the sound and disappeared from view behind the pillars on the other side of the crater.

“I’m going to keep him busy,” Jack mouthed to Goldilocks, and the twins and followed the bear.

The Snow Queen was all alone. Now was their chance.

“I say we just go over there and tackle her,” Conner suggested.

“No, I’m going to try to steal it on my own first,” Goldilocks said. “Stay here and keep a lookout. Whistle if you see anything.”

Goldilocks carefully stepped onto the frozen lake and made her way to the Snow Queen’s throne. As one would expect from a master thief, she was very agile, barely making a sound.

Goldilocks was halfway there. The twins crossed their fingers; they were watching her so intently they forgot to keep an eye on the rest of the crater. Just when she was a few feet away from the Snow Queen, a small piece of ice crunched loudly under her foot.

“Who’s there?” the Snow Queen yelled and raised her scepter.

Suddenly, the polar bear reappeared from behind the pillars and charged toward Goldilocks. With one swipe of his paw, he knocked Goldilocks to the ground and she slid to the center of the frozen lake.

“Goldilocks!” Jack screamed, emerging from behind the pillars himself. He raced toward the polar bear with his axe raised high.

The Snow Queen heard him and pointed her scepter directly at him. A bright icy blast erupted from its tip and hit Jack. He flew across the crater and crashed into a pillar. He scrambled to his feet but was hit again by another icy blast from the Snow Queen—this time a sheet of thick ice pinned his hands and chest to the pillar behind him. Jack struggled with all his might, but he was stuck.

Although she was blind, the Snow Queen apparently had impeccable hearing.

“Who dares disturb my *palace*?!” the Snow Queen demanded.

Goldilocks was hyperventilating on the ground—terrified of the polar bear before her. The Snow Queen glided toward her.

“Leave her alone!” Jack yelled from across the crater, desperately struggling to free himself.

The Snow Queen raised her scepter in Goldilocks’s direction. But just then, a giant snowball came out of nowhere and hit the Snow Queen square in the face.

“Hey, abominable snow-woman! Over here!” Conner yelled at her.

The Snow Queen let out a furious moan and the twins could see her breath in the cold air. The polar bear roared and lunged toward them, but the Snow Queen stopped him.

“*No*, you stay here,” she ordered. “I want to kill them myself!”

The twins didn’t waste a beat and took off running. The Snow Queen went after them, following the sounds of their footsteps. They ran behind the frozen waterfall and found themselves entering a large cavern.

The polar bear slowly walked toward Goldilocks. His sharp teeth were exposed and drool was dripping from his salivating mouth. “No one disturbs the Snow Queen and lives to see another day!” the polar bear growled.

“Goldie, get up!” Jack yelled. “You have to get up!”

“I-I-I can’t!” she whimpered, sliding away from the approaching bear as fast as she could.

“What’s the matter?” the polar bear asked her. “Am I too close for comfort?”

“Actually,” Goldilocks said, *“you’re exactly where I want you!”*

Goldilocks retrieved her sword and hit the frozen lake as hard as she could. A large crack bolted across the lake straight to the polar bear. The ice under his feet caved, and the polar bear fell straight through into the freezing water below.

“That’s my girl!” Jack hollered proudly. *“Woo-hoo!”*

Goldilocks got to her feet and caught her breath. It was very rare for her heart to race this fast. She carefully looked down at the hole in the ice, waiting for the polar bear to resurface, but the water refroze before he had the chance.

Goldilocks ran over to Jack. She reached into her boot, pulled out a few matches, and struck them against her belt. She held the small flames against the ice trapping him.

“We have to hurry!” Goldilocks said. “The twins are in trouble!”

Alex and Conner ran through the cavern with the Snow Queen hot on their trail. They were barely avoiding the icy blasts she sent toward them.

“Come back here!” she demanded.

The cavern was full of enormous icicles protruding from both the ceiling and the floor—as if the twins had discovered the mountain’s teeth. There was very little light but the ice was extremely reflective. The twins could see themselves everywhere they looked.

As if the situation couldn’t get worse, the twins ran smack into the second polar bear. He was standing at a long ice table sorting through a collection of props: pots and pans, bells and whistles, pieces of metal, and

blocks of wood—everything the bears needed to keep the Snow Queen's ears believing their charade.

The polar bear sneered down at the twins, and they bolted in the opposite direction.

"How dare you intrude upon my palace!" the Snow Queen screamed, blasting icicles into pieces near the twins.

"You're not in a palace! The bears have been lying to you!" Alex shouted back at her.

"You live in the mountains! You haven't conquered anything!" Conner added.

"They're liars, My Queen," the polar bear proclaimed. "We would never do something like that to you—*to your left, My Queen*!"

The Snow Queen pointed her scepter to her left, and an icy beam hit the icicle directly to the twins' left. Thankfully, the polar bear had mistaken their reflection for the real twins.

"To your right, My Queen!" the polar bear shouted, acting as her eyes.

The Snow Queen blasted away the icicle directly to the twins' right, missing them by inches.

"Conner, I hate to say this, but I think it might be smart to—"

"Split up?" Conner said, finishing his sister's sentence.

They separated and ran in different directions. It looked like there were dozens of Alexes and Conners running through the cavern now.

"Ahead of you, My Queen!" the polar bear shouted.

The Snow Queen followed his instructions and fired icy blasts in every direction he told her.

"To your right! Behind you! To your left! To your front! Behind you again! To your side!" the polar bear instructed. Alex and Conner were running circles around them. The Snow Queen was going to blast the entire cavern away if she wasn't careful.

"Now to your side! Turn around! One is right behind you! He's getting away! Quickly, to your left!" the polar bear yelled.

The Snow Queen shot a strong blast to her left and the cavern went silent.

"Well?" the Snow Queen grunted. "Where are they?!"

Alex and Conner looked back—the polar bear was frozen in a block of ice. In her attempts to shoot them, the Snow Queen had hit him.

The Snow Queen grew frustrated and yelled so loudly the entire cavern started to shake. The cavern rumbled and the twins looked up to see a massive avalanche rolling straight toward them.

Conner dived behind an icicle. Alex hid under the ice table. The avalanche swept through the cavern and engulfed the Snow Queen. She screamed as it crashed into her. The wave of snow settled and the cavern was dead silent.

Alex peeked her head up from the table. The Snow Queen was lying on the ground, covered in a mound of snow. Her crown had been knocked off and her scepter was lying nearby.

Alex cautiously walked over to her. Was she dead? Could she hear her approaching?

Alex leaned down and picked up the scepter. Just as her hand wrapped around it, the Snow Queen grabbed on to Alex's forearm and pulled her in close. The cloth slid off of her lids and Alex was staring into two bright lights instead of eyes.

"Of the four travelers, one will not return…" the Snow Queen rasped. Then the lights faded into nothing but empty eye sockets. The Snow Queen's hand around Alex went limp and she fell unconscious.

Alex didn't understand what had just happened. Had the Snow Queen just given her a prophecy?

"You got it!" Conner said excitedly and ran up to his sister. He was covered in snow but was jumping for joy.

"Yeah, I did," Alex said—still unsure of how to process what the Snow Queen had just told her.

Jack and Goldilocks charged into the cavern. They were so relieved to see the twins. They took one look at the frozen polar bear and at the trapped Snow Queen and laughed.

Jack playfully nudged Goldilocks. "And *you* were worried they were in danger," he said.

"Jack, look out!" Conner yelled. Jack ducked just in time to miss being slashed with a claw. The other polar bear had managed to get out of the frozen lake and appeared behind them—he was soaked and furious. He leaped toward Jack and Goldilocks, ready to tear them apart.

Alex pointed the scepter at the polar bear and an icy beam hit him in the chest. He froze in midair and hit the ground, trapped in ice.

“Well, I’m ready for this snow day to be over,” Conner said.

“Let’s get out of here before the bears thaw out,” Goldilocks said.

The group found the opening in the glaciers they had entered through and followed the marks Goldilocks left back into the harsh winds. They traveled south until they found the *Granny* right where they had left it.

“You’re back! You’re back!” Froggy said and literally leaped for joy as they climbed aboard the ship. “Well, how’d it go? Did you get the scepter?”

Alex showed him the Snow Queen’s scepter. “Boy, do we have a story for you!” she said.

But before Alex could even start, Red emerged from the lower deck. “Oh good, you’re all back! You won’t believe what happened to me while you were gone!” she said.

“*We* won’t believe what happened to *you*?” Conner asked, wondering what could top defeating polar bears and a Snow Queen.

Red was cradling something in her arms like a baby. As she neared the others, they could see it was furry and had four paws.

“I got a puppy!” Red said and happily showed them the small dog sleeping in her arms.

“Where did you get a puppy?” Alex asked.

“I grew a little impatient waiting for you to return—*oh, I see you got the scepter! Well done*—anyway, I went for a walk to pass the time and I found this little guy wandering around the snow alone! He was helpless, starving, and adorable, so I decided to adopt him!” Red explained.

No one knew what to say. Anything they could have said about retrieving the scepter wouldn’t have been nearly as interesting to her as the pup in her arms.

“Did you name him?” Conner asked.

“I named him Claudius,” Red informed them. “I named him after one of the characters from my favorite Shakeyfruit play, *Hamhead*.”

Froggy hit his forehead with an open hand. “*Hamlet*, my dear,” he corrected her.

“Yes, that’s the one,” she said. “But I’m going to spell it with a *w*. Wouldn’t that be divine? Clawdius, with a *w*! Do you get it?”

Everyone nodded along with her like she was a three-year-old child—except for Goldilocks. She was staring daggers at Red.

“You probably don’t get it,” Red said and explained it to her further. “If I spell it with a *w*, the word *claw* will be in his name, like an animal claw. Get it now? Say it with me, Goldie—*Clawdius*.”

Goldilocks looked down at the small dog and then back up at Red with a smile. “He’s very cute, congratulations.”

The others did a double take. They had never seen Goldilocks collect herself so effortlessly before.

“Thank you,” Red said. She climbed the steps back down to the lower deck, rocking her new pet as she went. “Oh my, what cute little paws you have, Clawdius! Oh my, what precious little eyes you have. Oh my, what pointy little ears you have…”

Goldilocks began unloading all her weapons, chuckling as she did.

“That was big of you,” Conner said to her.

“What’s so amusing?” Jack asked.

“Red is in for a rude awakening,” Goldilocks said.

“Oh, dear,” Froggy said. “Why is that?”

A sly smile came to Goldilocks’s face. “I’d recognize one of those anywhere. That’s not a *puppy*—it’s a *wolf cub*.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE WICKED STEPMOTHER

Red was insufferably inseparable from her new pet. While the others rested in the lower deck after their encounter with the Snow Queen, the sounds of Red playing fetch with Clawdius kept them tossing and turning in their cots.

"Fetch, Clawdius!" Red encouraged in a loud and high-pitched voice. "Go on, boy! Go get the stick! Bring it back to Mommy!"

Since they had decided it was best for the *Granny* to fly covertly at night, everyone on board was struggling to adjust to the nocturnal traveling schedule, getting sleep whenever they could—and Red wasn't helping matters.

A loud clank came from the upper deck that caused everyone to jolt.

"That's it!" Goldilocks said, jumping out of her cot. She ran up the steps to the upper deck and was mortified by what she saw—*Red was using the ice scepter to play fetch with Clawdius.*

"Are you insane!?" Goldilocks said, yanking the scepter out of the pup's mouth.

"What? He likes it," Red said.

The twins could hear their conversation as clear as a bell below, and they worried these moments would be Red's last.

"You're really not helping my urge to throw you and that mutt off this ship!" Goldilocks said.

Red ignored her. She hummed a tune to herself and took a seat on the other side of the deck. Clawdius curled up in Red's lap and went to sleep as she stroked his bushy gray fur.

"Hoods have always suited me so well, and motherhood is no exception," Red said. "Isn't it amazing how quickly we've bonded? What are the chances a poor dog would be stranded in the wilderness and rescued by a fabulous queen? I feel like we're living in a story!"

Goldilocks had had enough. It was time to burst Red's bubble.

"He treats you like you're his mother because *he actually thinks you're his mother*," Goldilocks said. "He's bonding with your coat, Red, not you! Clawdius is a wolf!"

“What?” Red said with a laugh, as if it was the most preposterous thing she had ever heard in her life. “That’s ridiculous! There’s no way Clawdius is a…” Her voice trailed off. She looked down and saw Clawdius sucking on one of the buttons of her coat—disappointed no milk was coming from it.

Red was suddenly aware of the familiarity of his teeth, his ears, his snout, and his fur—she had seen all these features before, just on a larger scale.

A piercing scream erupted from the back of Red’s throat. *“WOLF!”* She jumped to her feet and pushed Clawdius to the ground. *“Get it away from me! Get it away from me!”*

Jack, Froggy, and the twins climbed to the upper deck when they heard the screaming. They were afraid Goldilocks might have finally lost her patience and tried to murder Red, but Goldilocks was leaning on the banister watching Clawdius chase Red around the deck with a huge smile on her face.

“Don’t just stand there! Help me!” Red yelled at Jack and the twins. She was running in circles and Clawdius was playfully barking up at her, thinking they were playing another game.

“Darling, please calm down!” Froggy said. “He’s just a tiny little—”

“He’s a bloodthirsty killer!” Red screamed. *“Just look at him! He’s probably been plotting to kill me in my sleep since he came aboard!”*

“He’s not the only one,” Goldilocks said.

“Get away from me, you ferocious beast!” Red yelled over her shoulder at the baby wolf. The twins found her choice of words to be a bit extreme. The wolf cub didn’t seem threatening in the slightest, especially as Clawdius was now chasing his own tail.

“Perhaps you could raise him to be *unferocious*, my love?” Froggy suggested.

“Name one example of *that* method working!” Red yelled. Froggy drew a blank. “That’s because you can take the wolf out of the wilderness but you can’t take the wilderness out of the wolf!”

Red stood on the banister and Clawdius jumped up at her, trying to join her on the ship’s edge. He grew tired of jumping up for Red’s affection and sat on the floor just below her with his oversize paws spread in front of him.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Red said. “I can’t be your mother if I’m constantly worried you’re going to maul me to death, now can I?”

A singular sad yelp came out of the pup and he looked at her sideways.

“I have a history with wolves, you know,” Red said. “One almost gobbled me and my grandmother up when I was a little girl! A wall was built around my kingdom to keep out the likes of you. Surely you can understand the inconvenience?”

Clawdius whimpered, somehow understanding the young queen. He moped over to Froggy, feeling like he had been abandoned for a second time.

“There, there, old chap,” Froggy said and picked up the tiny wolf. “We’ll find you a nice home, don’t you worry.”

Red stayed on the banister for the majority of the day, too afraid to move.

That night, as soon as the sun set, Jack fired up the ship and Froggy steered it south. It sailed through the clouds of the Northern Kingdom to their next destination—Cinderella’s wicked stepmother’s estate.

Jack and Froggy took shifts through the night navigating the *Granny*. The twins tried to sleep, but it was difficult with the *Granny* rocking along the midnight sky and because Red was talking in her sleep.

“Oh my, what soft fur you have, little Clawdius,” Red said, and stroked an imaginary dog in her bed. “Oh my, what small nonthreatening teeth you have.… Oh my, what strong non-growing bones you have.… Oh my, what a delicate little diet of fruits and vegetables you have.…”

Goldilocks had successfully blocked out the noises with a pillow wrapped around her head. Alex wasn’t so lucky. Not only did she have Red talking in her sleep to drown out but also the fear of what the Snow Queen had told her in the cavern.

Out of the four travelers, one would not return. What did it mean? Was she referring to the twins, Jack, and Goldilocks? Was she telling Alex that one of them was going to die? Had she actually made a true prophecy or was she just trying to get into Alex’s head?

Alex wondered if anyone had literally worried themselves to death, because if not, she was probably going to be the first. Her thoughts were overwhelming and Alex finally gave up on the idea of sleep. She got up from her cot and discovered her brother had done the same. She climbed up

to the upper deck and found him leaning on the banister facing the East. He held a quill, and a stack of parchment was spread in front of him.

It was quiet out here. Only the sounds of the *Granny*'s sails flapping in the wind and the flickering of the central flame could be heard.

"You couldn't sleep, either?" Alex asked.

"I don't think someone comatose could sleep through all of that," he said.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked, gesturing to his quill and parchment. "Not homework, I hope. I think you'll be allowed to turn in a couple late assignments given the circumstances."

"No, I'm just writing," Conner said. "I'm making notes of all the things we've seen and the places we've been so far. I don't want to forget anything. I may want to make a couple short stories out of it. The Snow Queen's polar bear servants, Red having a pet wolf, *pheasant pudding*… It's all good stuff."

"That's great," Alex said. "I hope you get to use them—"

Alex said it without thinking. Conner stopped writing and took a deep breath.

"Alex, we're gonna save Mom," he said firmly.

Alex didn't know what to say. "I hope so—"

"No, I need to hear you say it. We won't be able to do it unless we both believe it."

Alex found the confidence in her brother's eyes contagious. "We're going to save Mom," Alex said, this time fully believing it.

Conner smiled. "Good," he said. "Thanks for that."

"What keeps you so positive? Usually I'm the one giving the pep talks, but you've been boosting my morale since we got here."

"What are our options? If I have the choice of being doubtful or being hopeful, I'm going to choose hopeful. It takes less work to be positive."

Alex smiled at him. "That's a nice way to see things."

"And," Conner added, "you know once we save Mom's life there's no way she'll ever be able to say no to us again!"

Alex laughed and covered her mouth, forgetting the rest of the ship was asleep. "Okay, *now* you're getting your hopes up way too much!"

The twins savored the thought. Conner was right; it was much easier than letting their minds fill with doubt.

A cool breeze suddenly blew past the ship and shivers went down their spines.

“Do you feel that?” Alex asked.

“Yeah, what’s going on?”

Alex looked over her shoulder and gasped. *“Conner, look!”* She turned her brother in the direction she was facing.

Slowly gliding toward them was the ghost Conner had seen in Red’s castle. There was something so majestic, so regal, and yet so frightening about her all at the same time.

“It’s the ghost!” Conner whispered. “That’s the one I was telling you about!”

The ghost’s gaze grew more serious as she approached them.

“Say something to it!” Alex elbowed her brother.

“What am I supposed to say? I don’t speak ghost!”

The spirit stopped and hovered a few feet in front of them. She never blinked or looked away from the twins. Whoever she was, she was a very serious spirit.

“Who are you?” Alex peeped.

The ghost remained silent and still as ever.

“What do you want from us?” Conner squeaked.

The ghost raised her hand and simply pointed into the distance. And as the *Granny* passed through a weak cloud and a veil of mist brushed past them, the ghost vanished.

The twins’ hearts were racing. “Who was that?” Alex asked.

“I wish I knew,” Conner said. “Why is she following me?”

Alex thought about it. The spirit had looked so familiar to her, but she couldn’t put her finger on why. “She’s trying to tell us something.”

The *Granny* settled into the countryside of the Charming Kingdom just before sunup. Luckily, only a few grazing cows witnessed the large ship descending from the sky, and they weren’t the least bit interested in it.

The twins kept the second ghost sighting to themselves, not wanting to cause any further worry.

“So what’s our plan?” Conner asked the others. “How are we going to discover and steal the stepmother’s most prized possession?”

Goldilocks and Jack looked to each other and both shrugged. Froggy stepped forward and cleared his throat with a small croak.

“If I may, I believe I’ll be quite useful at organizing this scheme—I *am* from the Charming Kingdom, after all,” he said.

“By all means,” Alex said and gestured for the frog to take the floor.

“The stepmother,” Froggy declared with a finger raised, as if he were giving them a history lesson, “has always been obsessed with titles and social status—remember how desperately she wanted her daughters to marry my brother? If we want to get into her home and discover what her most prized possession is, we’ll have to do it in a very formal manner—and I think I know just how to do it.”

Froggy turned to Red. “Me?” she asked. “What do I have to do with anything?”

“You’re a queen, my dear,” Froggy said. “The stepmother would never resist the chance at having a royal in her home.”

Red rolled her eyes and folded her arms. “Oh, *now* I’m a queen? *Now* you’re all respecting my rank?” she said.

“Precisely,” Froggy said. “You’ll go to her home and request a sitting with her. Have a look around and pocket whatever you see she values the most.”

“Request a sitting for what?” Red asked. “What could I possibly need to talk to her about?”

Conner was quick to come up with an answer. “Tell her you’re designing a country home and Cinderella told you to look at her old house for inspiration,” he said.

Alex patted him on the shoulder. “Good one,” she said.

Red looked from side to side. They could tell the idea was marinating in her head. “Yes, that is a rather good idea… a splendid idea, in fact! I’ve always wanted a country home, actually. This may not be such a lie after all,” she said and happily clapped her hands. “Am I going alone?”

Froggy looked around at the others. “I’m afraid everyone here would look a bit suspicious if any of us were to go with you,” he said.

“We can go with you, Red,” Alex said. “We’ll pretend to be your cousins.”

Red looked the twins up and down and her face scrunched up disapprovingly. “Can we be second cousins? Our bone structures are just so different I’m not sure anyone would believe it.”

A dagger flew through the air and stabbed into the wall a few inches away from Red’s head. She screamed and fell to the floor. Everyone turned to Goldilocks—her hand was still extended from the throw.

“Sorry, it slipped,” Goldilocks said with a shrug.

Once Red recovered from Goldilocks’s “accident” she dressed herself for the day’s mission. She wore a red fascinator and an exceptionally fluffy red dress. Apparently Red had been saving this outfit for a special occasion on their trip and figured this was the best place to show it off.

Jack and Goldilocks stayed to keep an eye on the ship. Froggy escorted Red and the twins through the Charming countryside. He wore one of Red’s scarves around his head to conceal his amphibian skin. Red complained about her shoes the entire time as they walked, but the twins had grown so accustomed to her complaining it didn’t bother them.

Large storybook estates began popping up on the sides of the path as they walked farther into the kingdom. Some were made of brick; others were covered in ivy; and many had pointed straw roofs, just like the twins’ grandmother’s cottage. Farther off in the distance they could make out the tops of Cinderella’s palace towers. It was the nicest neighborhood the twins had ever walked through in the fairy-tale world.

“This is making me so excited to plan my country house!” Red said.

The twins rolled their eyes. At least Red didn’t have a cover to blow.

“What’s that over there?” Conner asked and pointed ahead of them.

A large display was gated off to the side of the path. They walked to the edge of the gate and looked inside. A very old and large decaying pumpkin was on the ground—it was like a jack-o’-lantern that had been left outside for far too long after Halloween.

“Read this!” Alex said, and pointed to the plaque placed in the ground.

THE ROYAL PUMPKIN REMAINS

THESE ARE THE REMAINS
OF THE CARRIAGE THAT
ESCORTED QUEEN CINDERELLA

TO THE RENOWNED BALL
ON THE NIGHT SHE MET
KING CHARMING.
THE PUMPKIN WAS MAGICALLY
TRANSFORMED INTO A CARRIAGE BY
THE FAIRY GODMOTHER,
BUT AT MIDNIGHT
THE SPELL WAS BROKEN
AND THE PUMPKIN TURNED
BACK INTO ITS ORIGINAL FORM.
IT HAS RESTED HERE EVER SINCE
CINDERELLA'S LEGENDARY DASH.

"Our grandma *would* be behind the most famous curfew in history, wouldn't she?" Conner said to his sister.

Red squinted at the rotten pumpkin. "She swept floors, rode in a pumpkin, and was friends with mice… and somehow Cinderella sets the bar for all the other queens," she said to herself. "I'll never understand that."

"This means we're very close," Froggy said. "The stepmother's estate should only be a little ways farther down the path. I don't want her to recognize me so I'll wait for you here. Best of luck!"

Red air-kissed him and she and the twins continued down the path. After a few minutes they reached the stepmother's estate—and it was not what they had been expecting.

Had the twins not known any better they would have thought the estate was abandoned. The house sat on the top of a tall hill and was in desperate need of repair. It was very dark, with tall windows, a steeple, and pointed gables. All the windows needed to be washed and most of them were broken. Half of the steps leading to the front door had caved in.

Everything on the property was either dead or overgrown. The entire estate was surrounded by a tall iron fence. Two suited guards patrolled the only entrance at the front.

"Whoa," Conner said. "This may be trickier than we thought."

The trio walked up to the guards in a very friendly, non-thief-like manner.

“Excuse me,” Alex said to one of the guards. “Is this where Cinderella’s stepmother lives?”

The guard glanced over to the other guard with an irritated look on his face. “This is the residence of *Lady Iris* and her daughters,” the guard said. “And yes, she is the queen’s stepmother.”

“Why is it so protected?” Conner asked.

The other guard made a face at him. “You’re not from around here, are you?” he said. “Lady Iris is not liked around these parts. The fence is for her protection from people who vandalize her home. Lady Iris doesn’t even bother fixing things anymore—there’s no point.”

Alex looked up at the house with a heavy heart. Even with knowing how poorly the stepmother had treated Cinderella, she couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. One of the higher windows was open and she saw white drapes flicker inside—someone was watching them from the house.

“Can we meet her?” Alex asked.

“What did you say? *Meet Lady Iris?*” the guard asked with a rude laugh. “No, I’m afraid not. Lady Iris never takes any visitors.”

“Run along now back to wherever you came from,” the other guard said.

Conner nudged Red—this was her cue. She cleared her throat and looked up at them with large, bright eyes.

“Gentlemen, I know it’s hard to recognize me without a proper hood over my shoulders, but I’ll give you another chance before I grow weary,” Red said with a haughty smile.

The guards said nothing. They didn’t recognize her at all. Red became frustrated and her cheeks turned pink.

“I’m Queen Red Riding Hood of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom,” she said.

A guard raised an eyebrow and looked at her sideways. “If you’re Red Riding Hood, where’s your staff and sheep?” he said, half laughing as he spoke.

“That’s Little Bo Peep!” Red yelled and stomped her foot. The twins were growing frustrated, too. They hadn’t planned on this setback.

“Let them in,” said a frail voice from the high window at the house.

The guards were surprised by the command. Clearly this had never happened before.

“All right, the lady says you can go inside,” the guard said. He opened the screechy gate behind him and Red and the twins went through it. They carefully walked up the front steps and Conner knocked on the door with enormous spade-shaped knockers. They heard frantic whispering and hurried footsteps inside. It took a moment for anyone to answer the door.

The large door swung open and two awkward women cautiously peered from behind it.

“Hello?” Alex said. “May we come inside?”

The two women decided Red and the twins were safe and stepped out from behind the door. They were both very plain and plump (although one was shorter and heavier than the other). Each had curly brown hair and thin lips. They were the kind of women who had the potential to be pretty but had let themselves go over the years.

They fidgeted with their lacy dresses—as if they had gotten ready in a hurry. Alex nudged Conner; they both knew without a doubt they were facing Cinderella’s ugly stepsisters.

“Please come in,” the taller of the two said with an over-dramatic gesture.

The twins and Red took a step inside to the house’s entrance hall. A large staircase curved up and above them. The entire house was an absolute mess. The floors were dirty, the windows were dusty, and a foul odor lingered in the air. The twins wondered if Cinderella had been the last person to clean the house.

“Forgive the mess,” the shorter of the two said. “We weren’t expecting company.”

“Shocking,” Red said under her breath.

“No worries,” Alex said. “It’s just very—*lived in.*”

A loud creak came from above them. “Girls, girls, don’t be rude,” said a voice. “Introduce yourselves.”

Red and the twins looked up to see the infamous wicked stepmother herself standing at the top of the stairs. She was very thin and her hair was graying and done up in an impressively high bun. Her makeup was splotchy and smeared as if she had freshened herself in a rush. She held a cane as she wobbled down the stairs.

“Welcome to our home! I’m Lady Iris and these are my daughters, Petunia and Rosemary,” she said, and the taller one curtsied, followed by

the shorter one. The stairs creaked so loudly beneath her it was hard to hear what she was saying.

“Hello, Lady Iris,” Red said. “I’m Queen Red Riding Hood and these are my second cousins, Hamlet and Ophelia.”

The twins cringed at the sound of their aliases. “Pleasure,” Conner said and gave Red a dirty look.

The stepmother nodded cordially but her eyes held many questions. “Yes, I recognized you from Princess Hope’s first birthday celebration at the palace,” Lady Iris said.

“Oh yes, of course!” Red said, surprised to share the memory. “I remember meeting you there as well!”

“We didn’t stay very long,” Lady Iris explained. “It’s hard leaving home when people boo and hiss at you wherever you go.” She laughed even though no one found it funny. “Won’t you please join us in our sitting room, Your Majesty?”

Red and the twins followed the stepmother and her daughters into the next room. The stepsisters tried picking up the house as they went, but there was so much clutter the twins didn’t see why they bothered.

The sitting room had blue walls and white seats. It would have looked like a bright blue sky had it not been covered in a thick layer of grime; as it was, it resembled an overcast day. They all sat down and dust filled the air. Conner held a cough the best he could.

“You must forgive the state the house is in,” Lady Iris apologized. “My girls and I are useless when it comes to housework and it’s hard to find help when you have a history like ours.”

“I imagine,” Conner said.

“So what brings you to our humble abode, Your Majesty?” Lady Iris asked.

Red had no idea where to start. Saying that she wanted to build a country home that resembled the one they sat in would have been an obvious lie.

“Well, I… I… I…” Red said. “Ophelia? Why don’t you explain?”

Red and Conner turned to Alex, completely putting her on the hot seat. Alex looked up at the stepmother with a lie forming in her head, but she was distracted by several paintings of animals that lined the walls.

“What beautiful paintings!” Alex said, changing the subject. “Whose work are they?”

Petunia’s mouth fell open; she wasn’t used to being complimented. “*I* painted those,” she said with large, excited eyes.

“Petunia is quite the gifted painter,” Lady Iris bragged. “She does animal portraits mostly but she’s been working on landscapes.” Her voice was smooth and dreamy, as if she were a saleswoman.

“I like animals,” Petunia said enthusiastically, so happy to talk about herself. “I usually paint the ones I see outside my window—sometimes they’re pets, sometimes they’re pests—animals have always liked me, too; there’s something trusting about me, I guess. Anyway, it gives me something to do.”

Red and the twins nodded politely.

“Well, that’s *exactly* why I’m here!” Red said. “I’ve recently adopted a *wol*—excuse me—a dog, and I was hoping you could paint a portrait of him.”

Alex and Conner were sort of relieved and sort of mortified by Red’s sudden ad lib. Petunia’s bottom lip quivered. “Really?” she asked. “I would love to!”

“I LIKE TO BAKE!” Rosemary yelled—desperate for attention herself. The outburst caused the others to jump in their seats. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to shout! I just like to cook and would love to cook for you if you’d let me.…”

“Rosemary is an exceptional baker,” Lady Iris boasted. “She cooks all our meals at the house.”

“Well, someone has to, otherwise we’d starve,” Rosemary said with a laugh, although it wasn’t funny. Laughing through misery must have been a family trait.

Both of the stepsisters were so excited to show off their talents they could barely sit still. Lady Iris, however, was still looking at her three guests skeptically.

“What do you usually bake?” Conner asked Rosemary.

“Rosemary, why don’t you go prepare a batch of your mushroom biscuits for our guests? And Petunia, why don’t you go to your room and gather other samples of your paintings to show Her Majesty?” Lady Iris said.

The stepsisters leaped to their feet and collided into each other, running opposite directions in the house. They could hear the stairs creaking as Petunia ran up to her room. Rosemary disappeared behind a swinging door into the kitchen—for a split second the twins caught sight of the stacks of dirty dishes piled inside.

Once her daughters had left, Lady Iris dropped her cordial face and glared at Red and the twins with a suspicious stare.

“You have such lovely daughters,” Red said with a tight smile.

“Save it,” the stepmother said sharply. “I’ve lived in this house alone with my daughters for years—I know Petunia is a lousy painter and Rosemary is an even worse cook. Why have you *actually* come here today?”

They didn’t answer her. Red and the twins didn’t have to look at one another to know they were all sporting the same doe-eyed expression.

“I see,” Lady Iris said after they didn’t respond. “You’ve come to mock an old woman and her daughters, then, have you? Come to laugh at the black sheep of the kingdom? How dare you, especially at a time like this.”

Lady Iris struggled to get to her feet so she could escort them out. “I’ll show you to the door,” she said.

“Why did you do it?” Alex asked abruptly.

Lady Iris turned back to her. “Excuse me?” she said.

“I bet that’s not a question you hear very often, but I’ve always wondered why you were so cruel to Cinderella,” Alex said. “Why did you dislike her so much?”

“Alex, how is this helping our cause?” Conner whispered to her, but she waved him off. Lady Iris stared her down, searching for a malicious motive behind her question, but Alex didn’t have a malicious bone in her body. Lady Iris went to the side of the room to a small fireplace. A very dusty portrait was hung over it. Lady Iris took a deep breath and blew the dust off the painting. It was of a very attractive and dignified man with auburn hair and a full beard.

“Who is that?” Alex asked.

“My late husband,” Lady Iris said. She stared up at him with her back to the twins. “Does he look familiar?”

The resemblance was so blatant they didn't have to think twice; Cinderella was the spitting image of her father.

"Ella has always looked just like her father," Lady Iris said. "Her father nicknamed her Cinderella when she was a toddler because she loved playing in the fireplace—she would cover herself in so much soot and ash she was unrecognizable. When her father died I found it unbearable to look at her face. I forced her to do countless filthy chores around the house, covering her appearance so she wasn't a constant reminder of what I had lost. Now the face I had spent so many years trying to hide is one of the most recognizable faces in the world."

The stepmother slowly caressed the wedding ring she still wore on her left hand. Red looked at the twins out of the corner of her eye. They were all three thinking the same thing: *They had found her most prized possession.*

"So you don't *hate* her, then," Alex thought out loud. "It wasn't jealousy, it was *heartache*."

Lady Iris lowered her head. "I'm twice the widow but half the woman Cinderella is," she said. "When the way I treated her was revealed to the rest of the kingdom and my daughters and I became hated across the land, Cinderella had the fence built and had the guards placed around our home so we'd be protected. She visited and apologized to *us*. Can you believe that? After all we had done to her, she felt guilty about what her marriage to Prince Chance had done to *us*."

"In your defense, it seems like the story has been exaggerated a bit," Conner said. "Your daughters aren't *ugly*, for example; they're just average looking."

The stepmother sat back down across from them. "Indeed," she said. "The kingdom has always loved mocking us. I heard a rumor that after the ball when the prince visited, my girls tried cutting off parts of their feet to get them to fit inside the glass slipper. *Such nonsense!*"

Lady Iris looked at them vacantly—she had nothing else to tell them.

"Well, is that all you were after, then? An old woman's useless confession?" she asked.

"Not to add salt to the wound, but that hatred is actually why we're here," Conner said. "This is going to sound crazy, but we're on a bit of a quest—"

“Conner, I don’t think it’s smart to tell—” Alex tried to say.

“Why not? It’s not like we’ve got anything to lose at this point,” he said and continued with his explanation. “We think we’ve found a way to defeat the Enchantress. It requires us to go on a bit of a treasure hunt. Your ring is one of the items we need.”

“*Excuse me?”* the stepmother asked, appalled by the request.

“Your granddaughter’s life is in danger,” Alex said. “Don’t you want to help her?”

Lady Iris looked away to hide the shame in her eyes. This was evidently a sore subject for her. “*Grandmother* is not a title I consider myself worthy of,” she said. “A *grandmother* is the mother of a child’s mother—and I have never been a mother to Cinderella.”

The room went quiet. The stepmother had to calm herself down from the emotional declaration.

“Well, it’s not too late,” Red said. “Giving us your ring would be quite the noble act. It’d be the most *Cinderellian* thing you could do. Your status in the community may change when people find out you helped us.”

With this said, the twins could see a spark ignite in Lady Iris’s eyes. They knew if they could speak with her for a little while longer they might be able to convince her. Unfortunately, the kitchen door swung open and Rosemary brought a tray of her mushroom biscuits into the room, bringing the conversation to a halt.

“Who wants mushroom biscuits?!” Rosemary asked happily. The energy had completely changed in the room since she left it and she couldn’t figure out why.

Lady Iris stood again. “You’ll have to wrap them up, Rosemary,” she said. “Our guests were just leaving.”

“Leaving?” said Petunia, walking into the room with several rolled-up portraits under her arms. “But I just found my best paintings.”

Red and the twins rose to their feet, too.

“No, your mother is right. We better get going,” Red said. “After further consideration, I think I may be getting rid of my dog—I have a suspicion he may be a wolf. *It’s a long story*. We’ll be in touch about the portrait if I should acquire another pet.”

The stepsisters’ faces clouded over with disappointment. Petunia threw her portraits to the floor. Rosemary went back to the kitchen and dumped

the biscuits into a brown sack for them to take.

“Here,” Rosemary said through an enormous frown as she shoved the sack into Conner’s chest. “Eat them soon. They spoil after the first hour.”

Lady Iris walked Red and the twins back through the entrance hall to the front door. The twins kept glancing at each other, waiting for the other to do something. Alex thought her brother’s method of tackling her might be their only option.

Lady Iris opened the door for her visitors but blocked them from leaving. “Wait,” she said to the twins as they passed her. She slipped her wedding ring off her hand and placed it into Alex’s. “Make sure to tell Cinderella I gave it to you.”

Red and the twins couldn’t believe their eyes, but their spirits soared.

“We will!” Alex promised her.

“Thank you!” Conner said.

“I’m going to personally issue a statement to let people know you aren’t the mean old tart everyone thinks you are!” Red said and hugged her.

The stepmother forced a smile. “Unfortunately, some sins are forgiven and others are never forgotten,” she said. “I’m afraid the only place we could live free of judgment would be another world completely. But one day, long after I am gone, I hope Cinderella can tell her daughter I did something to help her.”

“She will,” Alex said. “Thank you.”

Lady Iris gave a shallow bow, not completely sure she had made a good decision. She shut the door behind them and the twins jumped with joy. Red and the twins passed the guards, who didn’t understand why the three of them looked so happy after spending an afternoon in *that* house.

Red and the twins walked down the path and found Froggy waiting for them at the Royal Pumpkin Remains exhibit.

“Well?” he asked. “How did it go?”

Alex opened her hand and showed him the ring.

“We got it! We got it! We got it!” Conner shouted. “We got the ring!”

An incredibly wide smile lit up Froggy’s face. He picked them both up and swung them around. “Well done, children!” he said and Conner shot him a look. “Forgive me, *young adults*.”

Red was quietly waiting for praise of her own but none came. “I wasn’t too bad myself!” she said.

“Of course you weren’t, my darling,” Froggy said and air-kissed her cheek. “Now let’s get back to the *Granny* and share the victory with the others.”

Froggy led the way back through the countryside to their flying ship. Goldilocks was thrilled to hear of their success, but Jack was nowhere to be found.

“He went into town to pick up some supplies,” Goldilocks said. “He’ll be back soon. But in the meantime let’s see if the Wand of Wonderment is all it’s cracked up to be.”

They placed the Snow Queen’s ice scepter in the center of the lower-deck floor. Alex was still gripping the stepmother’s ring so tightly it dug into her palm.

“How is this supposed to work?” Alex asked. “Is it like the Wishing Spell? Do we need all the items together for anything to happen?”

Conner shrugged. “Let’s find out,” he said.

Alex carefully placed the ring on the floor beside the scepter. The five of them waited impatiently for something—anything—to occur. Anticipation was even getting the best of Clawdius, who was curled up in the corner watching from afar.

“Well?” Red said.

“Shhhh!” Goldilocks silenced her.

The ring started to quiver. The scepter began to move as well. Suddenly, the ring magically attached itself to the tip of the scepter as if it had been magnetically pulled.

The room cheered. Alex and Conner hugged each other. Clawdius barked up at them happily, although he wasn’t sure what the celebration was about. It was a small occurrence, but it was the most meaningful part of their journey so far. All their efforts hadn’t been a waste—*they were building the Wand!*

Jack emerged down the steps to the lower deck a second later. He had just returned from his trip into town and carried a bag full of vegetables and bread.

“Jack! The wand is working!” Conner said. “Wait—what’s wrong?”

They had been so immersed in celebration they hadn’t noticed Jack’s long face.

“Jack, what’s happened?” Goldilocks asked him.

“While I was in town I heard some troubling news,” he said. The room grew very quiet.

“What is it?” Froggy asked.

“The Enchantress has attacked the Corner Kingdom,” Jack said. “She’s knocked down Rapunzel’s tower.”

Alex and Red gasped. Froggy’s large mouth fell open. Conner was still listening, expecting to hear more.

“So?” Conner asked. “It’s just a tower—what’s the big deal?”

He glanced over to his sister and saw tears running down her face.

“Am I missing something?” Conner asked. “It could have been so much worse. Thankfully, no one is dead.”

Froggy cleared his throat, emotion building up inside of him. “Much like the Hoodians’ wall, the tower is very sacred to the people of the Corner Kingdom,” he explained. “It represents their queen and the beginning of their country. It symbolizes their history and their spirit.”

Alex dried her tears and thought to herself: Of all the awful things to do, why was Ezmia picking off things that were *symbolically* valuable to the kingdoms? Why was she attacking people’s spirit, of all things?

“I just realized something,” Alex said. “Everything Ezmia has done—the tower, the wall, the plants, the kidnappings—it’s all been an attack on people’s spirits. It’s not casualties the Enchantress wants, it’s *souls*.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CASTLE IN THE SKY

The *Granny* sailed across the night sky over the Charming Kingdom, determined to beat the sun into the Red Riding Hood Kingdom. The news of Rapunzel's tower had left everyone in a somber mood, but the fact that they were successfully building the Wand of Wonderment kept them moving.

Jack and Froggy rolled a barrel of oil across the deck and loaded it under the ship's flame. Goldilocks was manning the steering wheel and carefully piloting the *Granny* between the clouds. Red was avoiding Clawdius as much as possible.

The twins were at the front of the ship watching the ground move below them. They wondered if they had flown over the place their mother was being kept.

"It's amazing how different the world looks from up here," Jack said cheerfully, walking up behind the twins. "I remember thinking that when I climbed the beanstalk. Very few people get a chance to see the world from a different point of view."

Red was eavesdropping and snuck into the conversation. "I know exactly what you mean," she said. "Once you start looking down on people it's hard to look at them any other way again."

The twins and Jack rolled their eyes. Red had shown great potential for rejoining the real world over the course of their trip, but she still had a long way to go.

"No, Red," Jack said. "I meant it really puts the world into perspective. Your whole life may exist between two streets, but then you realize those streets are just tiny veins in the body of the world. It makes you feel very small."

Red's head bobbed up and down as she followed along with what he was saying. For a second the twins thought she had understood what Jack meant.

"Oh dear," Red said and shook her head. "I don't believe anything could ever make me feel like *that*."

Jack and the twins weren't shy about their exasperation with the young queen and slowly walked away. Red leaned on the rail and let out a sigh, not understanding why it was so challenging to identify with them.

Froggy joined Red at the front of the ship, not wanting her to feel completely isolated after the exchange. While the others were constantly annoyed by Red's vain statements and lack of empathy, it just made Froggy love her even more. He had lived in hiding for years because he was afraid of how the world would treat a prince-turned-frog, but Red was the kind of person who would never lose confidence no matter what anyone or anything said to her. It was the trait he admired most about her.

"Are you all right, my love?" Froggy asked her.

"Yes, thank you," Red said and wearily looked down at the land beneath them.

Although he knew better, Froggy took her remoteness personally. "Are *we* all right, darling?" he asked. "I know having Jack and Goldilocks around is distressing for you, but if there was ever anything besides their company bothering you, you would tell me, right?"

Red still hadn't figured out what exactly was bothering her yet. It had been a thorn in her side since they left.

"Yes, of course, darling," Red said simply, although neither of them believed it.

Froggy's mouth smiled but his eyes remained blank. "Very well," he said and let her be.

Although she had insisted she could handle the situation, Froggy knew having Jack around would weigh heavily on her. Red wasn't hard to read—and the long stares at Jack from across the ship, her lengthy sighs when no one was looking, the way she ignored Froggy more and more as they traveled didn't go unnoticed. It didn't take a genius to figure out what Red was so conflicted about.

Unfortunately for Froggy, his human-turned-amphibian heart belonged wholly to Red, and he hoped hers still belonged to him underneath all her uneasiness. Until she told him otherwise, he would remain true to his affections for her.

"Look ahead!" Red called out to the others. "It's my kingdom! Oh my, how adorable it looks from up here! It's unfortunate the weather is so gloomy."

“I don’t think that’s just gloomy weather,” Goldilocks said from the steering wheel. Thick clouds were circling the kingdom like a whirlpool. As they sailed closer, they could make out a tall beanstalk penetrating the cloud’s vortex.

No one had ever seen such a thing… except for Jack.

“What’s all that about?” Froggy asked.

“It means the beanstalk is ready,” Jack said with an eager smile.

Conner placed a hand on his sister’s shoulder. *So were they.*

The crew began to descend the *Granny* toward the beanstalk. The sun started to rise and both of Jack’s old houses came into view. Only one thing was wrong—*the* Granny *was going way too fast.*

“Steady… steady…” Jack told Goldilocks. “Charlie, shut all the sails! Everyone else, brace yourselves! This is going to be a bumpy landing!”

Froggy yanked the ship’s ropes and securely shut the sails. Alex and Conner held on to Clawdius and the banister, Jack and Goldilocks held on to the steering wheel, and Red held on to Froggy.

“Everyone bend your knees!” Jack said, and they all followed his advice. The *Granny* glided down, headed straight for Jack’s manor. The front windows of the manor opened and the twins saw the magic harp blissfully welcoming the new day, unaware of the flying ship headed straight toward her.

“Oh the day is here and so am I,
To wistfully dream of birds that fly,
Soon I will be moved far far away,
And Queen Red Riding Hood’s castle is where I shall—AAAAAAH!”

The *Granny* crashed into the ground and bumped across the grassy earth. Chunks of dirt flew into the air, and the ship left a large furrow in the land as it came to an overdue stop *feet away from the manor*.

The harp’s mouth and eyes were wide open, and although she was made of solid gold, the twins could have sworn she went pale.

“Good morning, Harper!” Jack called down with an apologetic laugh.

The harp was so stunned one of the strings on her back snapped. The twins couldn’t blame her. After years of looking outside at nothing, she had just witnessed a flying ship crash in her front yard.

“*What in the name of Mother Goose is going on?”* the harp yelled.

“We’ve been traveling, just like I told you,” Jack said and climbed down from the *Granny*. “Did I mention we were traveling by *flying ship*?”

“You left out that minor detail,” the harp said, starting to recover feeling in her golden body.

“Thank you for keeping an eye on the beanstalk. It looks terrific!” Jack said.

“You’re very welcome,” the harp said. “You’ll be pleased to know I have thought it over and will accept your offer to be moved to Red’s castle. Although I hope you give me a few days for my strings to recover from the fright you just gave me. I don’t want my first ballad in the castle to be pitchy.”

“What? What did you say?” Red asked from the ship. “Did I hear you say something about being moved to my castle?”

Alex and Conner looked to each other—this was going to be awkward.

“Yes. Jack promised I would be moved in exchange for watching the beanstalk,” the harp said.

“Did he?!” Red said through her teeth. “This trip keeps getting better and better, doesn’t it?”

“Oh yes, I’ve been practicing for days! It’s been so long since I had a proper audience to perform for!” the harp said. “After spending more than a century with that awful giant, it’ll be such a treat to sing songs that aren’t about eating sheep and stepping on villages.”

The others climbed down from the ship and joined Jack at the front of the manor.

“Hey, Harper,” Conner said. “When you were up there, did you ever notice if the giant had a favorite item?”

“Not that I can recall,” the harp said. “I have no idea why you’d want to go back to that awful place.”

Jack inspected the beanstalk. He circled around the base and scanned it from top to bottom, kicking it in different places as he went.

“It’s ready!” he called to the others. “I’m going to climb it and return as quickly as I can.”

“Pardon?” Goldilocks asked with raised eyebrows. “Do you actually think you’re going without me?”

“He’s got to be kidding himself if he thinks we’re not going along, too,” Conner said to Alex.

Jack hadn’t meant to offend anyone. “Forgive me, I wasn’t sure anyone else would be up for it,” he said.

“It’s not every day one gets to see a castle in the clouds,” Froggy said. “Count me in as well.”

“Fine, then,” Jack said. “I’ll take the lead. However, it’s important that you climb exactly as I climb and step exactly where I step. It’s harder than it looks.”

Goldilocks retrieved a long rope and tied it around Jack’s waist, then around her own, Froggy’s, and the twins. She went to tie it around Red’s, but the queen nervously blocked her from doing so.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Red asked.

“It’s just for safety,” Goldilocks said. “In case one of us falls.”

“Falls? From up there?” Red said and pointed to the endless stalk. “Is that likely?”

“As likely as climbing anything else, I imagine,” Goldilocks said. “This will also discourage me from throwing you off of it.”

Red looked up and down the beanstalk with large, fearful eyes. “You know what, I think I’m going to sit this one out,” she said. “I’m exhausted after my sitting with the stepmother and want to conserve my strength for our next stop,” she said.

“Suit yourself,” Goldilocks said and promptly cut the rope after securely tying it around Alex.

“Are you sure, Red? The giant died a long time ago,” Jack said. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“What about what the Tradesman said?” Alex said. “He said there would be other dangers waiting for us up there.”

“The man was eating *pheasant pudding*,” Conner said. “Are you really going to take his word?”

“Good point,” Alex said.

Red pretended to consider it for a moment, but her mind was made up. “I still think I’ll be the most useful staying with the ship,” Red said.

“Fine by me,” Jack said. “Then if we’re all ready, *let’s climb*.”

Jack placed his hands on the stem of the closest leaf and pulled himself up and over it. *The climb had begun.* He enjoyed it more than he would

admit and cheerfully led the others up the beanstalk and toward the sky.

Jack and Goldilocks once again set a quick pace for Froggy and the twins to follow—although Froggy hopped his way up the stalk more than actually climbed it. The twins were glad to be the caboose of the climbing crusade; they had the least responsibility if someone fell.

“Let me know what the castle looks like in case I need to rebuild anything in the future!” Red called up at them.

Jack had been right; the beanstalk was tricky to climb. It didn’t have the sturdy branches that a tree would, so the stems of the leaves were all they had to grab hold of and step on. After some time had passed, the twins were thankful Red had opted to stay behind—it was difficult enough without her.

They were making great time in their ascent and Jack looked back to congratulate his fellow climbers. “You’re doing great,” Jack said. “But whatever you do, don’t look—”

“AHHHHHH!” Froggy yelled.

“Down,” Jack finished.

“Sorry, I won’t make that mistake again!” Froggy assured them, trembling a bit as they continued. The twins didn’t know how high up they were and didn’t want to—ignorance was bliss in this scenario.

After only a couple short breaks here and there, the group reached the top of the beanstalk by noon. The twins’ bodies were aching already and they just hoped the trip back down would be easier.

“This thing is getting harder and harder to climb,” Conner said.

“It doesn’t help that the air is getting thinner,” Alex said.

“We should start wearing skinny jeans,” Conner said. “We’d both look great in them after this workout.”

Everything became foggy as they reached the top of the beanstalk. They felt the cool moisture of the clouds against their skin until they finally emerged above the clouds. It was as if they had surfaced in another world completely; for miles and miles around, a sea of fluffy clouds surrounded them. They felt closer to the sun, and its rays illuminated this world to perfection.

“It’s beautiful,” Goldilocks said. The twins had never seen her so moved by something before.

“Extraordinary,” Froggy said breathlessly. “I’ve read so many descriptions of such a thing, but that’s never as good as seeing it with my own eyes.”

The top of the beanstalk curled into the open sky above them. They all waited for instructions.

“Whoa,” Conner said and pointed into the distance. “Check it out!”

An enormous medieval-looking castle sat on the cloudy horizon. It had huge stone bricks, several flat towers, and a gigantic wooden door.

“Is that the giant’s castle?” Alex asked.

“I’m assuming,” Conner said. “Unless Mary Poppins moved into the neighborhood.”

“Who?” Froggy asked.

“Never mind,” Conner said.

Jack carefully placed a foot on top of one of the clouds. It sank down but eventually came to a stop. He took a wobbly first step onto the cloud and the others gasped.

“Oh my God!” Alex yelled and covered her mouth.

“No way!” Conner shouted.

Jack was beside himself with the joy of standing on a cloud again, but he put on a serious face before turning back to the others.

“Carefully step off the beanstalk and onto the cloud, but don’t put your weight on it until you know your foot has stopped sinking,” he instructed them. “Be gentle. If you move too fast, you’ll fall straight through.”

Goldilocks was first, followed by Froggy, and the twins joined them after—it was like walking in fluffy quicksand. With each step, the twins waited for their feet to eventually stop, never certain at what point it would, or if it would. Sometimes their legs would sink ankle-deep into the clouds; other times they would sink down to their knees.

“This is the weirdest thing we’ve ever done!” Conner said. “Or it’s at least near the top of the list.”

The cloud crusaders headed across the sky to the castle. To their relief, a stony path came into view that curved through the clouds all the way up to the castle’s entrance. They were grateful to be walking on something solid again and removed the rope that had been connecting them.

“I really wish I could turn off my brain sometimes,” Alex said. “I keep trying to come up with a scientific theory that explains how we’re walking

on a road through the sky, but nothing is coming to mind."

Conner cleared his throat. "To quote a girl I know, 'My most scientific analysis, with all means of science and technology in mind, is that it's magic,' " he said.

Alex laughed. "How do you remember that?" she asked.

"It was my favorite thing you've ever said," Conner said.

It was taking them much longer than they'd anticipated to reach the castle. It didn't matter how long they walked; the castle didn't seem to be getting any closer.

"Is it moving away from us?" Conner asked.

"No," Jack said. "It just seems that way because it's so gigantic."

After what seemed like miles and miles of stony road, the group finally came face-to-face with the giant's castle. It would have been big at a normal scale, but Jack, Goldilocks, Froggy, and the twins stood before the wooden door dwarfed like a pack of mice.

"Sure, it's *big enough*, but look at the *location*!" Conner said and chuckled to himself. No one laughed with him—they were too overwhelmed by the castle's magnitude.

"Remember what you were telling us earlier about feeling small, Jack?" Alex said. "I think if Red saw this, she'd understand what you were talking about."

"Thankfully, she's not here," Froggy said. "Otherwise she might try to re-create it somehow."

They stayed staring up at the massive structure for a minute longer.

"Well, we can't stand out here all day. Let's go inside," Goldilocks said.

"How do we get in?" Alex asked.

"Is there a doorbell Froggy could jump up to?" Conner asked.

"We'll have to crawl—*follow me*," Jack said. He got on his hands and knees and squeezed into the space between the door and the ground, barely fitting. "This was easier when I was a boy."

They followed him under the door, each moving uncomfortably through the small space. They got to their feet on the other side, finding themselves in an entrance hall the size of a football field. The stones that made up the stone floor were the size of swimming pools. A staircase

soared above them like a dozen connected skyscrapers, each higher than the next.

“What is that awful smell?” Alex asked and covered her nose with her shirt.

Goldilocks heard a loud *crunch* under her boot and looked down. Scattered across the entrance hall floor were hundreds and hundreds of bird skeletons. They belonged to normal-size birds but were large even so—the twins assumed they were the remains of hawks and eagles. Perhaps they had flown too close to the castle and had been scooped up by something.

“Did the giant like birds?” Conner asked Jack.

“Not that I remember,” he said. “Let’s keep moving. Everyone keep an eye out for something the giant would have valued above anything else.”

Jack led the group to the right and they entered an enormous dining room. A rug that could have carpeted a dozen regular homes was under a gigantic table and chairs. A large portrait hanging on the wall took them by surprise—it was a painting of *the magic harp.*

“I’d say the giant fancied the magic harp a great deal,” Froggy said.

“Yes, he *certainly* did,” Goldilocks added, scanning the room in its entirety. The portrait was just one of several different artworks inspired by the magic harp. There were statues and sculptures of her displayed around the room; oil and finger paintings of her covered the walls. Even the backs of the chairs had the harp’s silhouette carved into them.

“Is anyone else thinking what I’m thinking?” Conner asked.

“Was *Harper* the giant’s most prized possession?” Alex asked.

No one wanted to believe they had traveled all this way for nothing, but as they looked around the giant’s dining room and discovered more and more harp-inspired pieces of art, it was difficult coming up with an alternative theory.

“I know he loved her very much—I just wish I could have remembered all of this,” Jack said. “I remember walking through this very room and hearing a *psst.* I looked up and saw the harp standing on the top of the table. She was looking down at me and said, *‘Hey, kid, get me out of here, would you? I’m going stir-crazy in this place.’* I took her, and when the giant noticed she was gone, he came after me.”

“At least we know how to convince Red to let Harper into her castle,” Conner pointed out. “We’ll tell her she was all the rage with giant

decoration. Who knew she'd be the epitome of *fee fi fo feng shui*!"

The twins laughed but their laugh was cut short when a loud jingle sounded through the room.

"What was that?" Goldilocks asked.

The jingle sounded again, only this time it was much louder.

"Jack, didn't you say the giant was dead?" Froggy asked, nervously adjusting his tie.

"He is," Jack said. "And he didn't have any family to speak of."

Conner turned toward the direction they had just come from—and stood stock-still.

"Hey—hey—hey, Jack?" Conner peeped. "Did the giant have any *pets*?"

Everyone turned around and froze. Standing directly behind them was a cat the size of a house.

"Mew," the cat squeaked so loudly they all had to cover their ears. The giant's cat was obese, with gray fur, black stripes, and white paws. It blinked its large green eyes slowly and stared down at them in a flirtatiously fatal manner. A red band was wrapped around its neck, and a bell the size of one of their heads swung from it.

"Guess we know where the bird skeletons came from," Alex said under her breath.

A low rumbling sound filled the room as the cat began to purr. It licked its lips, its eyes grew, and its narrow pupils shrank. Goldilocks retrieved her sword and Jack pulled out his axe.

"No one move," Jack said. "On the count of three we're all going to run under the table and split up to try confusing it. Ready? One… two… *three*!"

The five bolted under the table and spread out. The cat leaped after them, trying to grab hold of as many of them as it could. They ran through the table and chair legs, dodging the claws coming at them from all angles.

"This is why I'm a dog person!" Conner yelled.

The cat was so excited it didn't know whom to start with first. It eventually became most fascinated with Froggy, who out of all of them looked the most like a giant cat toy. He was hopping around like a maniac, barely missing the cat's claws and snapping teeth.

"Somebody help me!" Froggy shouted.

Jack grabbed hold of the cat's tail—the twins didn't know what he expected to accomplish by this, because he immediately flew through the air, whipping around and hanging on for dear life. The cat's belly swung almost more dangerously than its claws and knocked the twins to the floor as it passed by them.

Goldilocks saw a large knife peeking over the top of the table above her. She climbed up the chair leg and then jumped from the seat and grabbed on to the top of the table. She pulled herself up and went to the large knife—but it was too heavy to lift.

The cat violently jerked its tail and Jack was thrown across the room. Froggy was screaming like the twins had never heard him scream before. He hadn't been injured yet, but his clothing had been shredded by the cat's claws. The cat cornered Froggy and crouched down, about to pounce.

"Not the frog! Not the frog!" Froggy tried to persuade the giant feline. *"I won't taste good, trust me!"*

Goldilocks whistled from the top of the table. "Here, kitty, kitty," she called down. She had managed to get the knife on its side and was reflecting light to the other side of the room. The cat left Froggy alone and began chasing the reflection around the room.

Alex and Conner helped each other to their feet.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"Yes, I'll be all right," she said.

"Alex! Conner! Charlie! I've got a plan and could use a hand!" Jack called for them. He was standing in front of the giant's cupboard. "Let's get this open and we'll trap the cat inside!"

The twins ran over and helped him pull the large cupboard doors open.

"What am I going to do?" Froggy asked, completely out of breath.

"Stand in front of it," Jack said. "When the cat goes in for the kill—jump out of the way!"

"Oh, thank goodness," Froggy said with fake relief. "For a minute I thought it was going to be *dangerous*!"

The cat quickly became bored with chasing the reflection. It looked up and saw Goldilocks on top of the table—*she* was what it wanted now.

"Oh no," Goldilocks said to herself. The cat ran toward her, jumping onto the top of the table in one leap. Goldilocks dove under the tablecloth—she moved around like a bug under a rug, and it drove the cat crazy.

“Mew,” the cat squeaked, trying to grab her through the tablecloth. *“Mew.”*

“Hey, whiskers!” Froggy shouted. “Care for some frog legs?” He did a little degrading dance to get the cat’s attention.

“Mew?” The cat considered. *“Mew,”* the cat decided and jumped down from the table toward the frog.

“Now, Charlie!” Jack shouted. The twins watched in horror as if it were happening in slow motion. The cat was zooming toward Froggy, ready to sink its teeth and claws into him. Froggy hopped out of its way at the very last second, narrowly avoiding its outstretched claws. The cat slammed into the cupboard, and Jack and the twins shut the doors behind it. Froggy joined them and together they fought against the cat, trying to keep it inside.

A heavy grunt came from the top of the table. Goldilocks pushed a giant spoon over the edge, and it hit the floor with a thud. She slid down the table leg like it was a pole in a firehouse. The twins ran to her and helped her carry the spoon to the cupboard. They slid the spoon between the handles of the cupboard and the cat was trapped—*for now*.

“Raaaaaar!” the cat angrily growled from inside the cupboard. *“Raaaaaar!”*

“Let’s get out of here!” Jack ordered. “The spoon won’t hold it in there forever!”

The five of them made a mad dash through the dining room and back into the entrance hall. The cat banged violently against the cupboard doors, bending the spoon ever so slightly with every push.

Jack and Goldilocks ran toward the door at full speed. They hit the floor with perfect momentum and slid under the door. Conner tried copying them but only tripped himself and had to climb under the door the regular way with his sister and Froggy.

Once they were all outside, the five of them took off running as fast as they possibly could down the stony path.

“The cat isn’t going to follow us outside, right?” Conner asked the others as they ran.

They all glanced back, praying they wouldn’t see the cat emerging from the castle behind them. What they hadn’t seen until now was a giant cat door cut into the castle’s door and a furious cat poking its head through it.

“Oh come on!” Conner shouted.

The cat chased after them like a fat and furry torpedo. Thankfully its weight slowed it down, so it took a while for it to catch up with them.

The stony path ended and the group of five carefully moved through the clouds at a sluggish speed. The cat was apprehensive about stepping onto the clouds, but it was too determined to stop now. Luckily, it had just as much trouble walking on the clouds as they did, but the cat still tried clawing at whoever was closest to them.

“We’ve got to get down!” Goldilocks shouted. *“Everyone crawl the rest of the way to the beanstalk!”*

They all fell to their hands and knees and were covered by the clouds. They couldn’t see where they were crawling, but at least the cat couldn’t, either. It tried digging them out of the clouds, sending large cloudy chunks into the air, but it never found anyone.

One by one, Jack, Goldilocks, Froggy, and the twins found the beanstalk and started their descent back to the ground. They didn’t even bother with ropes this time—in fact, they were practically throwing themselves down the beanstalk. Leaf by leaf, they bounced closer and closer to the ground below.

“The cat’s not going to follow us down the beanstalk, is it?” Conner asked, but just as he did, the cat poked its huge head through the clouds above them.

“Mew!” the cat said, delighted to finally find them.

“GOD, I HATE THIS FLIPPING CAT!” Conner yelled.

The cat was descending the beanstalk behind them now. It looked like an elephant climbing down a tightrope. It was timid from the height, moving at a lazily cautious pace. It clearly hadn’t thought this plan through.

Goldilocks started slicing down the beanstalk’s leaves as they passed them, making it more difficult for the cat to follow.

“What in the world—?” a voice shouted up at them. Red was staring up at the beanstalk, watching her five friends being chased by an enormous cat. *“Am I actually seeing this or did I bump my head when we landed earlier?”*

“You’re actually seeing it, my dear!” Froggy yelled down at her.

Clawdius was going nuts, too. He barked up at the colossal cat in the sky and pulled against his restraints. The tiny wolf made the enormous cat

very nervous and it stopped, now stuck on the upper part of the beanstalk.

"*Red! You need to cut down the beanstalk!*" Jack yelled down at her.

"*Excuse me?*" Red asked.

"*You need to cut it down before the cat reaches the bottom!*" he yelled. "*There should be an axe in my shack—get it and start chopping!*"

Red looked around for someone else to do it instead, but there was no one to be found.

"*Red, we need you!*" Alex said.

Red mustered up all the determination she had. "I'll do it!" she yelled. She ran straight into the shack—but quickly ran back out a moment later. "*Wait—which one is the axe again?*"

Goldilocks slapped an open palm against her head.

"*The one that looks like this!*" Jack said, raising his own.

"*Got it!*" Red said and ran back into the shack. She ran out, dragging a large axe behind her as if it weighed more than her.

"*Now chop it down!*" Jack yelled.

Red nodded. She lifted the axe, which took all the strength she possessed, and swung it toward the beanstalk. She missed it by several inches and the swing spun her to the ground.

"*Come on, Red! You can do this!*" Alex cheered down at her.

"*We believe in you, darling!*" Froggy called down.

Red looked at her reflection in the axe and fixed a strand of her hair that had fallen. She took another swing at it, and this time she hit the beanstalk but only left a tiny dent in it.

"*I hit it! I hit it!*" Red said and jumped up and down, so proud of herself.

"*You're going to need to hit it about a thousand times harder than that!*" Goldilocks yelled.

The cat grew agitated, seeing the five of them getting closer and closer to the ground. It started to climb down again, moving faster than ever, its bright green eyes fixed on them. Red took another swing at the beanstalk, barely leaving a larger mark.

"*I can't do this!*" Red said through sniffles.

"*Yes you can, Red! Do it for your country! Do it for your granny! Do it for me!*" Froggy encouraged her.

"*PRETEND THE BEANSTALK IS GOLDILOCKS!*" Conner shouted.

Everyone on the beanstalk froze and just stared at Conner. Red looked down at the axe more determinedly than ever—Conner had done the trick. With one confident swing, Red sliced through the entire base of the beanstalk with practically inhuman strength.

Everyone was shocked, but not as shocked as Red. Even the cat looked surprised.

The beanstalk began to teeter. *"Everyone get to this side of the beanstalk!"* Jack yelled, and they all swung themselves to the side of the beanstalk that wasn't going to hit the ground.

The beanstalk slowly began to fall… faster and faster and faster.… The cat, however, wasn't ready for its quest to conclude. It sank one front paw into the beanstalk and a back paw into the clouds above it, holding it in place.

"Now what?" Alex yelled.

Clawdius broke his restraints on the deck of the *Granny* and ran down to the base of the beanstalk. He barked up at the gigantic cat dangling in the sky.

"Raaaaaar!" the giant cat yipped fearfully. In one giant leap, it let go of the beanstalk and soared back into the cloudy world above.

"Timber!" Jack yelled.

The beanstalk fell toward the ground like a giant whip. It crashed into the manor, splitting it in half like a knife slicing a birthday cake.

Jack, Goldilocks, Froggy, and the twins looked up at one another—they were all surprised they had survived the ordeal. There was a moment of silence before they heard an earth-shattering scream. They all looked toward the manor—the beanstalk had missed the golden harp by inches.

"That's the second time I almost died today and it isn't even dusk!" the harp shouted.

The team climbed down from the beanstalk and brushed themselves off. Froggy gave Red an enormous hug.

"You saved our lives!" Froggy said and twirled her around.

Goldilocks avoided making eye contact with Red. "Nice one," she said begrudgingly, and then quickly walked away.

The twins lay on the grass and caught their breath. The clouds began to part now that the beanstalk was gone and revealed a beautiful bright blue sky.

“I *never* want to do that again,” Conner said.

“Never,” Alex agreed.

Jack walked over to the newly destroyed manor.

“Hey, Harper,” he said, with an apologetic hesitance in his voice. “I’ve got good news and bad news. *Good news*—you’re still moving! *Bad news*—you’re coming with us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE REFLECTION

Let me get this straight," the magic harp said. "You're on a *quest*, collecting the most *prized possessions* of the most *hated people* in the world to build a powerful *wand* that you hope will overthrow the *Enchantress*? And *I* happen to be one of those possessions?"

Conner shrugged. "That's right," he said. "Although it sounds lame when you say it like that."

It took Jack, Froggy, and Conner to move the harp of solid gold into the lower deck of the *Granny*. Once they got her there, the men and the women of the ship surrounded her and told her all about their mission and her newly discovered relevance to it.

"I don't understand. How am I supposed to be a part of that wand?" the harp asked and gestured to the ice scepter Goldilocks had been showing her moments before.

Froggy had to agree. "I don't see how you fit into this, either," he said. "You're awfully big to be a part of a wand."

"I beg your pardon?" the harp snapped at him.

"My apologies," Froggy said. "I just meant, everything else has been small material items. We've yet to have—well—whatever it is that you are."

"Whatever it is I am?" the harp said. "That's rich, coming from a *giant frog man*!"

Froggy took a step back and bowed out of the conversation completely.

"What if we cut off one of her fingers or something?" Conner suggested.

"What?" the harp yelled.

"Conner, that's so barbaric!" Alex said and hit him in the shoulder. "Why would you even mention such a thing?"

"It was only an idea," he said.

"But what would happen if she came in contact with the Wand?" Goldilocks asked. "Will she shrink? Will the Wand blend into her somehow? *Would she die?*"

The harp went berserk and desperately tried to jump out of the ship, but she was too heavy to lift herself.

"Harper, calm down," Jack said to the overly excited instrument. "No one is going to harm you."

"But I'm still your prisoner, aren't I?" the harp said. The strings on her back played the opening chords to a dramatic ballad.

"Right when it teased me,
The cruel world deceived me,
No hope now for freedom,
No stars now to wish upon,
Born for imprisonment am I,
Can't be free until I die—"

"Enough, Harper," Goldilocks said. "You're not our prisoner. We're just going to keep you around for a while until we can figure out what to do—then you'll be free to live your exciting life of watching grass grow and entertaining people against their will."

The harp squinted at Goldilocks and raised a golden eyebrow. "So *you're* the girl Jack ran off with, eh?" she said. "No wonder he can't be seen with you in public—I wouldn't want to be, either."

The twins both made *ooh*ing sounds. Jack and Froggy had to hold Goldilocks back. A high-pitched laugh erupted from Red's mouth and she slapped the side of her leg.

"You know, I think having Harper around my castle won't be such a bad thing after all," she said.

That evening at sundown they fired up the *Granny*'s flame and steered the ship northeast. Their next stop would be the ruins of the old abandoned castle for the Evil Queen's Magic Mirror. Alex and Conner slept most of the way—the journey up and down the beanstalk had taken a toll on them and they were so tired they slept through most of Red's sleep-talking and the harp's self-pitying songs.

The twins woke just before sunrise the next day and made their way to the upper deck. Red was already there when they arrived. She was cradling Clawdius again and the young wolf slept soundly in her arms.

"Reunited?" Conner asked her and she nodded happily.

“I had a nice long think to myself,” Red explained. “If it weren’t for Clawdius, a giant man-eating cat would be wreaking havoc on my kingdom right now. He’s not a killer after all! On the contrary—he’s a savior!”

“So the fact that he’s a wolf doesn’t bother you anymore?” Alex asked. She didn’t speak “Red” fluently yet.

“Not at all,” Red said. “What kind of mother would I be if I let something as simple as *species* get in the way of love? I’m courting a giant frog, after all! I’ll just raise Clawdius to be a loving and compassionate animal. If a wolf has never been capable of possessing such qualities before, then Clawdius will be the first. But if he tries eating me, Mama’s getting a new coat.”

They appeased her with fake agreeing smiles and left her with her pet.

The twins went to the front of the ship and looked at the ground below—what they saw horrified them. The entire Eastern Kingdom had been devoured by thornbushes and vines. The plants wrapped around every building below. Even though they had been told about it countless times, Alex and Conner could have never imagined what they were seeing.

“It’s just like the fox said in the Dwarf Forests,” Alex said. “The entire kingdom is covered!”

“I don’t think I realized just how powerful the Enchantress was until now,” Conner said with a gulp. “Seeing this really raises the stakes, doesn’t it?”

The thornbushes and vines began to thin out the farther northeast the *Granny* traveled. The overgrown terrain was replaced with the dry, deserted land the region was known for, and soon the ruins of the old abandoned castle could be seen in the distance.

What had once been an imposing structure was just a massive pile of stone bricks and pieces of wood now.

Jack, Goldilocks, Froggy, and Red joined the twins at the front of the ship and shivered. It was like seeing the remains of a large monster they had killed, but instead of a carcass, they felt as if they were nearing its sleeping body. Something about the castle still seemed very much alive.

The *Granny* landed gently beside the moat.

“How much of the mirror do we need to gather?” Conner asked the others. “Do we just need a piece of it or the whole thing?”

“It’s going to take a while to retrieve every piece of it if that’s the case,” Alex said.

Goldilocks removed the Wand from under her cot, where she stashed it for safekeeping. “We’ll take the Wand with us,” she said.

The six travelers headed out of the *Granny* and toward the destroyed castle.

“The Enchantress lived here once,” Alex said. “You don’t think there’s any part of her lingering, do you?”

Conner took a look around at the dead land surrounding them. “I don’t think there’s any life lingering around here whatsoever,” Conner said. “We’re all just spooked because of what happened here a year ago. There isn’t anything in that dump except a bunch of broken castle junk.”

One by one, Froggy helped the others across the moat. Once they were on the other side they came to a halt and stared at the rubble in dismay.

“How do we get in?” Conner asked.

No one had an answer. There didn’t appear to be a practical way of getting inside the ruins. They circled the rubble for a few minutes, looking.

“Over here!” Red called out. “I found a way in.” The others ran to her and she pointed to a small opening between two stone blocks that led deeper into the debris.

Froggy attempted to crawl through it. “We won’t fit,” he said. “It’s too narrow.”

“The twins will,” Goldilocks said.

“You want us to go in there alone?” Alex asked.

“It may be the only way,” Jack said, looking around the rubble. “I don’t see another option.”

The twins shared an anxious glance. Goldilocks placed her hands on their shoulders.

“We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you two,” she said. “You said it yourself: There’s nothing in there to be worried about. Go inside and try to collect as much of the Magic Mirror as possible. We’ll be right outside. Take this with you.”

Goldilocks handed Conner the Wand. He let it hang from the belt loop of his jeans.

“We’re all counting on you,” Red said, and then received dirty looks from the others. “I mean—*you can do it*!”

“Be careful, children,” Froggy said. “Try not to move anything while you’re in there. The stones have settled, but you don’t want them caving in anymore.”

Froggy seemed so concerned the twins didn’t even mind being referred to as children. Alex and Conner stepped up to the opening and gently squeezed through the stones, scraping their sides as they went. Inside, it was like an obstacle course made of debris. The twins carefully climbed over and under and through broken pieces of wood and stone. Everywhere they looked was a broken piece of the castle that triggered a not-so-happy memory of their last visit: a wooden beam, a cell door, a stair railing, an occasional smashed chair or table.

They climbed farther into the endless wreckage and soon entered a large clearing. They assumed they had reached what used to be the castle’s great hall—the place they had seen the Magic Mirror shatter.

“Alex, this whole place is covered in glass,” Conner said. “How do we know which pieces of glass came from what?”

Everywhere they looked they saw shards of glass. It was scattered across the ground and all over the mounds of rubble around them. Some fragments were bigger than others, and the twins could see their reflections in them, but it was impossible to determine which parts were the Magic Mirror and which were the windows or something else.

“Look!” Alex said and picked up a small piece. “It’s a piece of the Mirror of Truth.” She happily stared into the small piece, and the little reflection she could see of herself changed—the Alex in the reflection wore a long golden gown and had a pair of enormous sparkly wings behind her back.

“Let me see,” Conner said and looked into the piece of glass in his sister’s hand. His reflection also changed—the Conner in the reflection was wearing a golden suit and had a giant pair of shimmering wings behind him.

Conner stuck his tongue out. “Gross, put that thing away!” he said.

Alex tucked it into her pocket safely. She figured she might need a reminder of who she was in the days to come.

“How are we going to sort through all of this?” Alex asked.

Conner pulled the wand out of his belt loop. He held it into the air and a series of small scraping sounds came from all around the wreckage. Little

by little, pieces of glass inched closer to the wand, pulled magnetically by a magical force.

“I think I have an idea,” Conner said. He placed the wand in the center of the ground and quickly pulled Alex behind a large piece of wood. They watched as tiny bits of glass flew from all over the debris and attached themselves to the wand until it looked as if it were covered in silver sequins.

“Amazing!” Conner said and went to pick up the wand. “It almost looks futuristic, doesn’t it?”

Suddenly, the twins were both hit with an unsettling feeling. They both felt it at the same time, and each turned to the other, knowing it was mutual.

“Conner, do you feel that?” Alex asked.

“Yeah, what’s going on?” he said.

“I feel like someone’s watching us,” Alex said.

Conner looked around at the rubble. “How could anything be in here but us?” he asked.

Something began moving around them through the piles of rubble. They kept catching it in their peripheral vision, but it would disappear before they could get a proper look.

“*Conner!* Look into the glass!” Alex panted.

Gracefully gliding around them in the larger pieces of glass among the debris was the reflection of a young woman. She was pretty and wore a long white gown and had long raven hair. The reflection playfully circled them, giggling to herself as it did. Alex and Conner felt like they were in a reverse aquarium where *they* were the ones on display.

“Hello,” the reflection said and smiled. The woman’s voice was smooth and inviting, and it echoed from each piece of glass she moved through. “Who are you?”

There was something incredibly familiar about her. The twins were positive they had seen her before.

“I’m Alex and this is my brother, Conner,” Alex said and took a step closer to her. The reflection shot across to the other side and appeared in the glass behind the twins.

“Such funny names,” the reflection said. “Have you seen *Mira*?”

Conner grabbed Alex’s arm. *“Oh my God! Alex, it’s—”*

“He’s always hiding from me!” the reflection said and twirled around inside the pieces of mirror. “Mira? Oh, *Miiiiiira*?! Where are you?”

It settled in a large shard of glass, and Alex stepped closer to it. *“Evly? Is that you?”* she asked the reflection. It instantly looked up at her at the sound of the name.

“How do you know my name?” Evly asked with a big curious smile. “Have we met before?” As soon as she asked, her curious expression faded and she began to recognize them as well.

“Yes, we have,” Conner said. “Last year in this castle.”

Alex looked around at the castle remains and a horrible thought came to her. “You’ve been trapped in the mirror this entire time, haven’t you?” Alex asked her.

“Have you seen Mira?” Evly asked as if she hadn’t heard Alex. “I can’t find him anywhere.”

Alex felt her heart drop into the pit of her stomach. “She’s been trapped and it’s starting to affect her just like it affected Mira,” she whispered back to her brother.

“*Miiiiiira?* Where are you?” Evly said musically, floating through the glass around the room.

“Mira’s dead, Evly,” Alex said. “Don’t you remember? You tried freeing him with the Wishing Spell but it was too late.”

Evly looked to Alex and just stared at her, as if she was deciding whether or not to believe it. She began circling them more frantically.

“Mira? It’s not funny anymore—please come out now,” Evly asked, her voice growing more desperate by the second. “Where are you?”

It was hard for the twins to watch. Evly wasn’t just in denial; she was *cursed*.

“Evly, do you remember anything that happened to you?” Alex asked her. “Do you remember the Magic Mirror? Do you remember Snow White? Do you remember being *the Evil Queen*?”

Evly’s eyes grew and she gasped at the sound of her old sobriquet. *“I—I—”* Evly stuttered. Her reflection gradually aged and transformed into that of the Evil Queen the twins had known, as the memories of who she was and what she had done resurfaced in her mind.

“I remember…” the Evil Queen said, and her eyes filled with tears. “I remember everything… oh no, what have I done? How did I get here?”

“We tried to warn you but you wouldn’t listen to us,” Conner said. “The mirror fell on top of you and you vanished. There was nothing we could do.”

Tears rolled down the Evil Queen’s face as her mind filled with more memories of her heartless life.

“I was such a monster,” she sobbed. The Evil Queen collapsed with grief and her reflection appeared in pieces of glass near the ground. “I poisoned my own daughter.… I harmed innocent people.… I kidnapped children.”

Alex kneeled down to her. She wished she could reach through the glass to console her. “But it wasn’t your fault,” she said. “You had your heart cut out and turned into stone, remember? You didn’t know what you were doing.”

The Evil Queen nodded. “I was in so much pain—I didn’t know what else to do,” she said. “Pain will drive you mad if it’s strong enough; it’ll change you into something you’re not. It’ll turn you *evil*.”

“We know,” Alex said. “But that’s all in the past now.”

“You must forgive me, children,” the Evil Queen begged. “Forgiveness is what we all need to forget the past, even if we don’t deserve to.”

Alex and Conner nodded to her, willing to do anything they could that would give her consolation.

“Of course,” Alex said. “We forgive you.”

The Evil Queen smiled at them through her tears of shame. “Thank you,” she said. “I’m afraid I’ll never forgive myself, though. I spent my entire life trying to free him from this prison, and now I’m doomed to spend eternity in here without him. I couldn’t think of a worse punishment.”

“We could try to free you if you’d like,” Conner said. “We’re building a wand—a powerful wand. Maybe we could use it to get you out of there.”

The Evil Queen dried her tears and shook her head. “No, let me be,” she said. “I deserve this fate.… I deserve to be inside here.…”

Her head tilted and she stared at the twins, as if someone was whispering something about them into her ear. “You’re on a quest, aren’t you?” she asked them.

“Yes, how did you know?” Alex asked.

“I can see many things from inside here,” she explained. “I can reflect on the world in ways I never could before. I see a large ship waiting outside

these castle ruins.… I see a kingdom imprisoned by plants.… I see a whole world in fear.… I see—*I see Ezmia!*”

The Evil Queen shuddered at the thought of her former mistress.

“But how can this be? I thought she was dead.”

“You didn’t kill her like you thought,” Alex said, sorry to break the news to her.

“And now she’s back and she’s taking over the world,” Conner said.

The Evil Queen covered her mouth. “Oh no. I made the poison as strong as possible—it killed life outside the castle for miles—but even that wasn’t strong enough, evidently.”

Conner kneeled down next to his sister. “We’re trying to stop her. We need to know what her most prized possession was in order to do so. Would you happen to know what that might be?”

The reflection thought on it. “Ezmia’s most prized possession was always *herself*, and I don’t need magic insight to tell you that.”

“Oh boy,” Conner said. “That’s going to be difficult to retrieve.”

The Evil Queen grew very still as another troubling realization came to her. “Someone is following you.…”

“In here?” Conner asked.

“No, across the land as you travel.”

“Who? The Enchantress?” Alex asked.

The Evil Queen looked off into the distance as if she was trying to see something far away. “No, it’s neither a person nor a thing, but an entity.”

“The ghost!” Conner said. “We’ve been wondering what her deal is! Can you tell us who she is?”

“They call her the Lady of the East.”

The twins were stunned to learn the ghost’s name. They tried to remember if they had ever heard of the Lady of the East before.

“The east!” Conner said. “Every time I’ve seen her she has always pointed to the east! That’s what she was pointing at through my window in Red’s castle! And that’s the direction she pointed to when we were on the ship.”

“You must leave now,” the Evil Queen told them. “The Enchantress grows stronger as we speak—she plans on attacking again very soon. You must hurry if you want to defeat her before it’s too late!”

“But—” Alex started, but the Evil Queen’s reflection turned away from them.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you anymore, children,” the Evil Queen said. “I feel myself fading away more and more as every second passes.…”

“Wait! Please, you have to tell us more! Who is the Lady of the East and why is she following us?” Alex pleaded.

“Where is Ezmia going to attack next?” Conner asked, but the Evil Queen ignored them. “Hello? Can you hear us?”

The Evil Queen turned to them, but her reflection had morphed back into that of a happy and smiling Evly.

“Have either of you seen Mira?” Evly asked with a laugh. “I can’t find him anywhere!”

Alex and Conner sighed hopelessly. They knew they had gotten as much information out of the reflection as possible. They didn’t want to leave Evly there but knew it wouldn’t be long before the curse of the Magic Mirror took over her soul completely, just as it had Mira’s.

“Good-bye, Evly,” Alex said sadly. The twins headed out of the castle ruins as Evly continued her never-ending search for her long-lost love.

“Mira? *Oh, Miiiiiira?!* Where have you gone?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE SEA WITCH

The others were thrilled by the twins' triumphant return from the castle ruins.

"Well done," Froggy said and patted them on the back with a relieved smile.

"We knew you could do it," Goldilocks said and winked at them.

Red took the wand from Conner—she was mesmerized by it. "It's so shiny!" she said, although the twins weren't positive she was impressed by the accomplishment so much as by the fact that they had returned with something *else* she could view herself in.

"Was everything all right in there?" Jack asked them. The twins looked to each other and both fell silent.

"Not exactly," Conner said. "We saw the Evil Queen."

"She's been trapped in the Magic Mirror ever since she used the Wishing Spell," Alex said.

Everyone was just as shocked as the twins had been to discover this. "How horrible," Goldilocks said quietly to herself.

"There's no hope of getting her out now, I suppose," Jack said.

Conner shook his head. "She doesn't want to be rescued. She thinks she deserves to be in there. There's not much left of her to save anyway."

"Well, speaking as one of the victims she kidnapped and almost fed to wolves, I'm not sure I feel sorry for her," Red confessed.

"There's more bad news," Alex said. "We asked her about the Enchantress—she probably knew her better than anyone."

"What did she say?" Froggy asked, and they all leaned closer to hear the answer.

"She said Ezmia's most prized possession is *herself*," Alex said.

Jack, Goldilocks, and Froggy looked to one another with the same exasperated expression.

"It doesn't make any sense," Froggy said. "How can living things make up the wand? I understand how the harp could be considered a prized item, but not the Enchantress herself."

Red scrunched her lips and hummed, thinking on the subject. “I think the Evil Queen is mistaken. I’m not a stranger to loving myself, but that self-admiration *comes* from something. For example, if you took away my beauty or my incredible ability to match dresses with tiaras, I wouldn’t value myself half as much as I do now.”

The others weren’t sure how to gauge the outburst. Red was always very coherent or not at all; there was rarely an in-between.

“What are you saying, Red?” Goldilocks asked.

“I’m saying it’s not the actual *woman* we should be concerned about getting,” Red explained. “We need to find *what* the Enchantress values the most about herself and take it away from her.”

Everyone thought about it and their heads slowly moved in a mutual nod. This was the first moment any of them were happy Red had demanded to come along on the trip.

“That’s so insightful, Red!” Conner said. “*Shallow*, but insightful!”

“How do we retrieve it for the Wand?” Jack asked.

No one could come up with an immediate answer. What was the one quality Ezmia prized above the rest? There were so many things she obviously cherished. Her *beauty*? Her *power*? Her *ruthlessness*? Or perhaps it was a combination of all three? And whatever it was, how would they take it away from her?

“Well, we knew it would be a challenge,” Goldilocks said and let out a long sigh.

The six headed over the moat and back to the *Granny*. They returned to a furious harp, whose strings played an angry chord as she pouted.

“Harper? What’s the matter?” Jack asked her.

“That *thing* peed on me!” the harp exclaimed and pointed to Clawdius, who was crouching shamefacedly in the corner of the lower deck.

“That’s my fault; I forgot to take him out before we left!” Red said. “My apologies—*mother in training*.” She scooped him up and carried him off the ship.

The crew waited until nightfall before firing up the ship and steering it south.

“Next stop, Mermaid Bay!” Jack called out.

“Does the Sea Witch live in the bay?” Conner asked.

“From what I read, she lives in the ocean waters just outside it,” Froggy said.

“How do we find her?” Goldilocks asked.

“I’m a good swimmer, believe it or not,” Froggy said. “I can have a look around the ocean floor and report back to you. We’ll have to be very careful once we get there—the Sea Witch is known for being very sneaky with her trades.”

“We’ll have to outsmart her, then,” Alex said. “If her jewels are her most valued possession, we’ll have to trade her something in exchange for them.”

“What’s the most valuable item we have in *our* possession?” Conner asked. “What do we have to trade with her?”

“The harp?” Red asked a little hopefully.

“No, we need to keep her until we can figure out how to incorporate her into the wand,” Jack said.

Goldilocks’s face suddenly lit up as if an actual lightbulb had appeared over her head. “I think we’re all forgetting something in our possession that’s even more valuable,” she said.

“What’s that?” Alex asked. They all stared at her, completely puzzled.

“Red,” Goldilocks said. “We have an actual *queen* on our ship.”

Everyone immediately turned to look at Red. As expected, the young queen was appalled by the idea.

“You want to trade *me* to the Sea Witch like some farm animal?” Red said. “Absolutely not! Out of the question!”

“It is a good *option*,” Jack said, defending Goldilocks’s idea.

Red grunted and her nostrils flared. “Now you listen to me, *giant chaser*,” she said and pointed her finger at all of them. “So far I’ve built us a ship, lost half of my wardrobe, adopted a killer animal, snuck into the wicked stepmother’s estate, and supplied something nice to look at during this escapade. If you ask me, I’ve gone above and beyond what a *normal queen* would do! Do you see Cinderella flying a mile above the ground? No! Is Snow White risking her life for the greater good? No! Is Rapunzel braiding her hair to restore peace and harmony? No!”

Everyone slumped. They couldn’t argue, but they also didn’t have much to work with.

“*I’ll* do it, then,” Goldilocks said.

“What?” Jack gasped.

“I’ll pretend to be Red,” Goldilocks said plainly. “You can trade me for the jewels and the Sea Witch will never be the wiser.”

“We most certainly will not!” Jack protested, outraged by just the suggestion of it.

“It’s the best way,” Goldilocks said. “After you collect the jewels, you’ll only have one more thing to complete the Wand. Once you defeat the Enchantress you can come back for me—until then I’ll keep my cover and make the Sea Witch happy.”

Jack was shaking his head. He couldn’t imagine leaving the woman he loved the most in the world in the hands of someone so horrible.

“Oh, Jack,” Goldilocks said, flattered by how worked up he had become. “You know I’ll be able to handle a little old sea witch. I’ve been stuck in worse situations before.”

Jack held her close, looking deeply into her eyes. “What if, for whatever reason, we can’t come back for you?” he said.

Goldilocks looked down at the floor, knowing what he meant. “If I get anxious, I’ll find a way out,” she said and returned his loving gaze. “You have to trust me.”

It was an incredible sacrifice to make, but no one could persuade her otherwise.

“Red, I never thought I would ever say this, but I’m going to need to borrow a dress,” Goldilocks said.

“I doubt anything of mine will fit you,” Red said.

Froggy cleared his throat. “Darling, don’t be rude,” he said.

“That is—I’m sure I can make something work,” Red said and gave in. She grabbed Goldilocks’s hand and dragged her down to the lower deck to play dress-up.

Jack went to the steering wheel and looked ahead of them to the horizon, but his thoughts were anywhere but with the ship. Froggy played tug-of-war with Clawdius while Alex and Conner sat on the deck floor near the bow of the *Granny*.

Alex rested her head on her hand and stared off into space, having her own reservations about their plan.

“What’s on your mind?” Conner asked Alex. “You look troubled.”

Alex sighed. “It’s just a little concerning to think about leaving Goldilocks with the Sea Witch,” she said.

“I know, but what else can we do? It’s a great idea,” Conner said.

“I guess,” Alex said. Something had been on her mind, and she felt it was time to tell her brother before her head exploded. “Conner, when we were back in the Northern Mountains the Snow Queen said something to me—I didn’t think much of it then, but it’s really starting to worry me now.”

“What did she tell you?” Conner asked.

“She said, *‘Of the four travelers, one will not return,’* ” Alex said. “I thought it was just nonsense—I mean, an avalanche had just fallen on the woman—but now I wonder if she was making a prophecy. I wonder if she was talking about *Goldilocks*.”

“But there’s six of us traveling,” Conner said. “Seven including the mutt and eight counting the harp.”

“I know, it doesn’t make sense,” Alex said and rubbed her tired eyes. “But I’m still worried there may have been some truth to it. We’ve been really lucky so far, but what if one of us doesn’t survive this trip?”

Conner surprised her with his reaction—he didn’t reciprocate her fear but met it with a calmness that reminded her of their dad.

“Alex, we all knew what we were getting into,” he said. “Just because you and I are spearheading this mission doesn’t mean it’s our fault if anything goes wrong. We’re all trying to save the world, and as awful as it sounds, if one of us doesn’t make it in the process… I can’t think of a better way to die than being a hero.”

She let a long, exasperated breath escape her lungs. “There are worse fates, I suppose,” Alex said. “I’d hate to lose someone for no reason, though—I don’t know if I could live with myself.”

“We’ll just have to make sure we succeed, then,” Conner said.

Within the hour, Red climbed up from the lower deck with a proud smile on her face. “Eh-hem,” she said, getting all of their attention. “Lady, wolf, and gentlemen—I would like to introduce to you my latest creation. She may be a rough-porridge-eating-fugitive by day, but tonight I would like to introduce you to the new and improved *Goldilocks*!”

Goldilocks walked up the steps behind her. She was wearing one of Red’s corsets with a long red gown, a hooded cape, and matching gloves.

Red had even put her hair up in a stylish do similar to her own and had painted some rouge on her cheeks. There was no doubt about it—Goldilocks looked stunning.

"Goldie…" Jack said. "You look… you look… *gorgeous*." He looked like a teenager in love.

"Thank you," Goldilocks said and blushed. She didn't get too many opportunities to look pretty for him.

"You're welcome," Red said and swayed happily. "The corset is a little small for her. Poor thing, her waist isn't quite as slender as mine."

"That's because I'm hiding three daggers under here," Goldilocks said. She had trouble balancing in a pair of Red's high heels. "I don't know how you walk in these shoes—they're completely impractical."

"I don't know how you walk in them, either; they're meant for feet almost half the size of yours—*I'm only teasing, Goldie, put that knife away*!" Red said and ran to the other side of the ship.

The harp grew bored below them and began to play a soft melody for herself that could be heard on the upper deck. Jack grabbed Goldilocks's waist.

"Care to dance?" he asked.

"Oh, Jack." Goldilocks laughed.

"Come on, when's the last time we got to dance?" Jack asked.

"The last time I believe involved a witch throwing hot stones at our feet," she said.

Jack chuckled at the memory and spun her around. They danced to the harp's tune under the starry night sky, gazing into each other's eyes.

"Would you do me the honor?" Froggy asked Red, and offered her his hand with an overly pronounced bow.

"I'd be delighted!" Red said. They didn't dance quite as smoothly as Jack and Goldilocks—Red kept stepping on Froggy's large webbed feet—but both couples enjoyed the time for all it was worth. The twins smiled as they looked on, knowing this would be something they'd remember forever.

It was a few minutes before dawn and the *Granny* was still a ways away from Mermaid Bay.

“We’re not going to make it to the bay before sunrise,” Jack said from behind the steering wheel. “We need to put the ship down before we’re caught.”

“We can travel the rest of the way by water,” Goldilocks said. “We’ll land it in the Sleepy River and then sail down the river into the bay.”

“That’s brilliant!” Froggy said.

“Very well,” Jack said. “Everyone prepare the ship for a water landing!”

Goldilocks took over the steering wheel. Froggy grabbed hold of the sail’s ropes and flattened them to the sides of the balloon. Jack pulled the lever under the ship’s flame and it diminished. The *Granny* began to descend. Goldilocks aligned the ship with the wide river flowing on the ground below. The twins weren’t sure what to expect. Would a water landing be rougher or easier?

In a few moments they had their answer. The ship dove into the water, coming to a painful, abrupt stop and nearly submerging itself completely on impact. The entire deck and its crew were drenched.

Conner spat out a mouthful of water. “Thank goodness that was easy,” he said sarcastically.

“I’m on my side and can’t get up!” the harp called up from the lower deck. “The wolf is licking my face! Can someone please help me before he gets any other ideas?”

Froggy hopped down the steps to assist her. Red wrung her wet dress over the side of the ship; she was not enjoying life at that moment.

The ship sailed peacefully down the river as the sun rose farther into the sky. Not long after, Mermaid Bay came into view ahead. The ship was just about to spill into the bay from the river when it came to another abrupt stop, knocking everyone to the deck floor.

Jack jumped to his feet and ran to the front of the ship to look overboard. “The ship is stuck in the delta!” he said. The twins joined him and had a look for themselves. The *Granny* was only feet away from fully being in the bay but was stuck in a very narrow channel.

“Oh, great,” Conner grunted. “Now what?”

Just as the others were about to panic, something very colorful caught Alex's eye. "Look!" she said and excitedly pointed down at the water. The thing swam under the ship and disappeared from sight.

"Where did it go?" Jack asked.

"Alex! Conner! Jack!" Froggy yelled from the back of the ship. "Take a look at this!"

They joined him at the back of the ship and gazed into the river below. It was difficult to make out what was happening through the ripples of the water, but Alex and Conner recognized it right away. Dozens of mermaids had gathered behind the *Granny* and were slowly pushing the ship through the delta.

They had pale skin and long, colorful tails that matched their long, beautiful hair—just as the twins had remembered. The ship began to move through the channel little by little, thanks to the mermaids' efforts.

"Well, I'll be darned," Froggy said, amazed at what he was witnessing.

The *Granny* edged forward bit by bit, finally squeezing through the channel and splashing into the bay.

"That was so kind of them," Alex said.

"Why were they helping us?" Conner asked.

Goldilocks whistled from behind the steering wheel. "Speaking of mysteries, what is *that*?" She nodded to something ahead of them.

In the distance, hovering majestically in the misty bay air, was a large cluster of sea foam. It was shaped in the silhouette of a mermaid and shimmered in the sunlight, continuously rejuvenating itself.

Alex grabbed Conner's arm. "It's the Sea Foam Spirit!" she said.

"Come again?" Froggy asked.

"It's the Little Mermaid," Conner explained to the others. "Or at least it used to be. I wonder what she's doing here."

"You think she knows we're going to visit the Sea Witch?" Alex asked.

The *Granny* sailed closer to the foam until it hovered directly in front of the ship. "Hello, Alex. Hello, Conner," the Sea Foam Spirit said. The others were shocked to hear her speak.

Red rubbed her eyes—she didn't believe what she was seeing. "Is this clump of bubbles a friend of yours?" she asked the twins, as if she was making a judgment against their character.

“What are you doing here?” Alex asked the Sea Foam Spirit.

“I’ve come to speak with you,” the Sea Foam Spirit said.

“You’re trying to stop us from going to visit the Sea Witch, aren’t you?” Conner said.

“On the contrary, I’ve come to assist you,” the spirit said. “I may be the world’s greatest cautionary tale when it comes to matters of the Sea Witch, but I’ve come to offer you help. I’ve heard about your quest—we *all* have.”

The spirit gestured to the water below, where all the mermaids had gathered. The bay looked like a colorful koi pond.

“Who told you about our quest?” Alex asked.

“No one told me; I heard your thoughts,” the Sea Foam Spirit said.

“I thought you could only hear and feel thoughts expressed in or near the water,” Conner said, remembering what he had learned during their last encounter.

“As the snow melts down the mountains and pours into rivers that lead to the sea, it brings with it the thoughts of those who have traveled across it.”

Conner hooted. “So much for privacy,” he said.

“How can you help us?” Alex asked the spirit. “Can you take us to the Sea Witch?”

“I cannot leave the bay,” the Sea Foam Spirit said. “But I have asked an old friend to escort you to the depths of the sea where the Sea Witch dwells.”

“That would be terrific! Thanks!” Conner said. “Who is your friend? Are they solid, at least?”

“Very,” the Sea Foam Spirit said.

Suddenly, a gigantic splash erupted from the bay and a sea turtle of epic proportions emerged from the water. He was as big as their ship. The entire crew was flabbergasted and their eyes grew to the size of tennis balls.

Conner leaned closely to Froggy. “I never thought I’d see a reptile as big as you,” he whispered.

“The Great Sea Turtle is very old,” the Sea Foam Spirit said. “He can’t hear very well, but he will escort you to the Sea Witch.”

“How far away is the Sea Witch’s lair?” Jack asked.

“It’s a day’s journey to the bottom of the ocean,” the Sea Foam Spirit said. “But the Great Sea Turtle can get you there in a quarter of the time.”

“How are we supposed to breathe?” Goldilocks asked.

The Sea Foam Spirit extended both of her hands and six white scallop shells appeared. They each had a seaweed band around them, like they were oceanic surgical masks. The Sea Foam Spirit passed them to the men and women aboard the ship.

“These will supply you with air while you’re under the water,” she said.

“Do they come in pink?” Red asked.

Froggy passed on his shell. “I’ll be fine,” he said. “Being a frog has its perks, you know.” He took a very deep breath and his throat expanded into a large bubble.

“Awesome.” Conner chuckled and poked it.

The Sea Foam Spirit nodded to the Great Sea Turtle. “It’s time,” she instructed.

The turtle drifted toward the ship and placed his front flipper gently on the bow like a drawbridge. Jack and Froggy armed themselves with daggers and rope, then led the others over the turtle’s flipper and onto his shell. They gathered at the front of his shell and each held tightly to the edge.

“Good luck. May all the spirits of the sea be with you,” the Sea Foam Spirit said; then she disappeared.

The turtle drifted away from the *Granny* and gradually sank into the water. The water was colder than they expected, and they all gave small yelps.

It was very strange to breathe from the shells. They inhaled normally but a trail of tiny bubbles fluttered above them every time they exhaled. It was like they were magically scuba diving. And just like with regular scuba diving, there was plenty to see.

The entire bay floor was covered in bright coral and plants. Mermaids and fish of all colors and sizes swam through it like it was a vast underwater city, their bodies shimmering in the rippled sunlight from above. It was a beautiful sight and the twins made sure to seize every moment of it.

Soon they left the bay and the Great Sea Turtle traveled deeper into the endless ocean ahead. The ocean floor wasn’t nearly as colorful as the

bottom of the bay. It was very bare, with nothing but rocks and seaweed spread across it.

An enormous underwater canyon was ahead of them, and the turtle dived down into it. It had jagged edges and sharp rocks along its sides, and the canyon floor was littered with ghostly empty shells—it was like an underwater graveyard. They knew they were close.

The turtle swam through the canyon, and the twins saw a wide entrance to an underwater cave ahead. The cave was surrounded with small glowing lights, inviting and decorative. However, as they got closer, the twins realized the lights were the glowing antennae of a school of anglerfish surrounding the entrance to the cave. They were terrifying, with their sharp, toothy overbites and the spikes down their spines—they were the monsters of the sea.

The anglerfish glared at them as the turtle passed into the cave. To their discomfort, the inside of the cave was filled with even more of the scary-looking fish. They peered out from behind stalagmites and stalactites. Their antennae gave off the only light in the cave.

Imprisoned behind nets and rock cages throughout the cave were other sea creatures. Swordfish, sea horses, octopi, manatees, and whales all looked somberly at the passing turtle, hoping it wouldn’t suffer the same fate. The anglerfish watched over the creatures like prison guards.

The turtle arrived at the entrance to a long tunnel. As if the twins hadn’t seen enough to give them nightmares for years after, the tunnel was being watched over by a group of great white sharks. They lingered eerily in the water, staring sinisterly at the turtle and his passengers.

The sea turtle moaned at the sharks. Nothing happened. The turtle moaned again and the sharks slowly separated and let him pass into the tunnel. They turned chillingly as he passed; all they needed was one threatening gesture and the sharks would have food for a week.

They traveled through the tunnel for a few moments and then surfaced in a cave within the cave. To their astonishment, this cave was filled with air.

“We can breathe down here!” Alex said, and they all took off their shell masks.

“The Sea Witch has to appeal to her human customers, too,” Froggy said, and his throat deflated to normal.

They climbed off the turtle and walked across the floor in single file. They all shivered terribly—their bodies were so confused as to what temperature to be.

“Good turtle, stay!” Conner said to the Great Sea Turtle. The turtle squinted at him and then spat a stream of water in his face. “Sorry, didn’t mean to patronize.”

“Oh my lord!” Red gasped and tears filled her eyes. “Look up there!”

She pointed above them to one of the most gruesome sights the twins had ever seen. Dozens of mermaids were hung upside down from their tails across the dome-shaped cave ceiling. They were all weak and frail; some breathed heavily while others didn’t breathe at all; some were just skeletons, while others were close to becoming one.

“What are they doing up there?” Alex said, covering her mouth in horror. She wanted to save them all but knew it wouldn’t be possible, at least not today.

“Those are probably the Sea Witch’s customers who couldn’t fulfill their bargains,” Froggy said.

Jack was wide-eyed and white-faced, terrified they would be leaving Goldilocks to suffer in the same conditions. She implored him to stick to their plan in spite of what they saw, even though they could all tell she was hesitant herself.

The group traveled farther into the cave. A whale’s rib cage was positioned like a grand staircase leading up to *another*, smaller cave. Jellyfish carcasses covered the entrance like a curtain. A large rocky platform at the base of the ribs acted like a small stage—the Sea Witch must have enjoyed looking down on her customers.

“Are you ready for this?” Conner asked Goldilocks.

She nodded, mustering up as much bravery as she could. Jack kissed her as though it would be the last time. The passionate display normally would have made the twins look away, but they all shared Jack’s reluctance as he said good-bye to the woman he loved.

“I love you,” he whispered into her ear.

“Likewise,” Goldilocks said and winked at him.

The team huddled together, reiterating their course of action.

“All right, *we* are ruthless pirates who have kidnapped Queen Red,” Froggy said and gestured to the twins. “I have been cursed to live out my

days as a frog and you have been cursed to remain adolescents."

The twins nodded. "Aye aye, captain," Conner said and saluted.

"How fun! It's like a little play!" Red said and excitedly clapped her hands. "Who will I be?"

"You'll be hiding behind, with me," Jack said. "We'll be backup in case they run into any problems. Let's hide back here," Jack said and pulled the young queen behind a large rock. "It's always best to have backup."

"Let's make this a little more believable," Froggy said, taking the rope off his shoulder and tying it loosely around Goldilocks. She legitimately looked like a prisoner now. "Shall we?"

The four of them traveled up to the rocky platform while Jack and Red hid behind a large rock.

"Hello?" Froggy called up the whale ribs. *"Sea Witch? We've come to make a trade!"*

Their anticipation made time go by incredibly slowly as they waited for the Sea Witch to appear. Just when they began wondering if she would ever show her face, they heard horrible scraping noises from beyond the jellyfish curtain. A series of heavy footsteps—*several footsteps*—sounded through the cave, like a giant spider was approaching.

The Sea Witch appeared through the jellyfish curtain. Her skin was pale turquoise and scaled. Tall blades of seaweed grew straight out of her head like hair. She had a wide face, with wide turquoise lips and round insect-like black eyes. She wore a gown made of dark shell that had several mussels and sea polyps growing on it. She walked on six legs, and a pair of claws peeked out from under her gown, as though she were part crustacean.

She cuddled a plump cuttlefish in her arms, stroking it like it was a small slimy pet.

"Customers," the Sea Witch hissed in a snake-like voice. "Welcome, fellow vertebrates, to my underwater underworld."

The twins were shivering from being so cold, the Sea Witch didn't notice they were trembling from fear as well.

"Get me out of here!" Goldilocks yelled, playing the part of a captive Red. *"It smells so nasty in here! I want to go home! I want to be back in my castle!"*

"And who might we have *here*?" inquired the Sea Witch, interested by the choice of words.

“We have brought you Queen—” Froggy started, but Goldilocks interrupted him.

“I’ll introduce myself, thank you!” she said, playing the part impressively well. “I am Queen Red Riding Hood of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom! And if you don’t release me at once I will have my soldiers swim down here and make ink of you all!”

The Sea Witch’s eyes widened. Not only was she buying it, she was intrigued.

“A captured queen, you say?” she asked. “And you wish to trade her for what?”

“We’ve come for your jewels,” Froggy said.

The Sea Witch let out a long, hissing laugh that sounded like it might have come from a dying cat. “You insult me with your offer,” she said. “I’ll make a deal with you; I will give you one of my pearls in exchange for the queen.”

She gently placed her hand over the pearl necklace wrapped around her neck. Each pearl was black, and they were all of different sizes and shades.

“Witch, please!” Conner said. “We’ve got a living, breathing *queen*! We’re the ones who should be requesting more from you!”

The Sea Witch eyed him—she didn’t like being beaten at her own game. “You are just a large frog and two children. Tell me how you acquired a *queen*,” she hissed.

Conner laughed a little too hard. “We only appear as a frog and children because that’s how we’ve been cursed to spend eternity!” He pointed to his sister. “This *girl* used to be a six-foot man with the hairiest chest in all the kingdoms!”

Alex closed her eyes and assembled enough pretenses to go along with her brother’s ridiculous backstory. *“Grrr, I miss me man body,”* she said in her best impression of a pirate’s voice.

The Sea Witch looked down at them peculiarly—she had been hanging on every word they said until this point.

“I was on my royal boat when they scooped me up and brought me here!” Goldilocks cried, trying to authenticate their tale.

“Do we have a trade, Sea Witch?” Froggy called up to her. “Or shall we take the queen back to the land and sell her to the ogres?”

The Sea Witch thought on it, stroking the cuttlefish as she did. “Very well,” she said. “I believe we have a deal.”

The Sea Witch climbed down the whale ribs toward them. They got a better glimpse of her black pearl necklace, and their hearts fluttered with the knowledge that it was exactly what they needed. But the twins’ eyes fell to a familiar ring she wore on her turquoise finger. It was silver and had two diamonds, one blue and the other pink.

Alex and Conner looked back and forth between the ring and each other. Was it just a coincidence, or had their worlds collided more than they realized?

“That ring!” Alex gasped. “Where did you get it?”

The Sea Witch glanced at her ring and then suspiciously down to Alex.

“The same place I get all my jewelry,” she hissed. “From people like *you*, and creatures like *them*.” She jerked her head toward the ceiling where all the mermaids hung. “Do you want to make a trade or not?”

“Yes!” Froggy said, getting the twins back on the subject.

A conniving smile stretched across the Sea Witch’s face. “Hand over the queen first and I’ll give you the jewels,” she said.

“Nice try,” Conner said. “Give us the jewels and we’ll hand you the queen.”

The tensions between them grew.

“As you wish,” the Sea Witch said through a frown. She raised her arms and two crabs crawled out from under her dress. They crawled around her body, collecting all the jewelry she wore. The crabs climbed down the platform and stood in front of the twins.

Froggy untied Goldilocks and pushed her up the platform toward the Sea Witch. A long black-and-white-striped sea snake slithered out of the Sea Witch’s gown and toward her.

“On the count of three we’ll make the exchange,” the Sea Witch said. “One… two… *three*.”

The twins took the jewels from the crabs and the snake wrapped around Goldilocks like a living rope. Alex and Conner pocketed the pearls and the other jewels. They were happy the trade had been made, but they desperately didn’t want to leave Goldilocks behind.

“This has been splendid,” Froggy said with a nod and slowly backed away from the platform. “Pleasure doing business with you—”

“Not so fast!” the Sea Witch hissed. The crabs jumped to the other side of Froggy and the twins, blocking their way out. “Did you think I would let you go without checking to make sure the trade was truthful?”

The Sea Witch reached into her gown and pulled a dried-up blowfish from inside of it. She broke off one of the blowfish’s needles and pricked Goldilocks’s finger with it. She raised her cuttlefish toward the bleeding finger and it stuck out its tongue from between its legs and tasted it.

Froggy and the twins were so anxious they could hear one another’s hearts beat. They hadn’t been planning on *this*. The cuttlefish turned bright blue. The Sea Witch frowned angrily and knocked Goldilocks to the ground with one of her claws.

“*Liars!* My cuttlefish has turned blue! He did not taste royal blood!” she screamed.

“Uh-oh,” Alex said.

The crabs leaped onto the twins. The Sea Witch threw her cuttlefish and it hit Froggy, wrapping its legs around his face. All three frantically fought off the sea creatures attacking them, but it was no use.

The crabs pinched and poked the twins, scratching them and drawing blood. Jack ran to the twins’ side and, with two quick blows of his axe, chopped both of the crabs in half.

“Mmmmmm! Mmmmmm!” Froggy mumbled from under the cuttlefish.

Red ran to help Froggy. She took a good look at the cuttlefish and then, not wanting to touch it, took off her shoe and began hitting the cuttlefish with it.

“Not helping, darling,” Froggy mumbled under the cuttlefish’s clasp. She was mostly hitting him in the head.

Across the lair, Goldilocks pulled one of her arms free from under the snake and grabbed its head. With one tug, she pulled the serpent off her body. The Sea Witch was livid over such an easy escape; she stretched her legs and grew twice in height. She lunged toward Goldilocks, her claws snapping as loudly as gunshots in her direction.

“Goldilocks! Behind you!” Jack screamed.

Goldilocks swung the snake around, cracking it like a whip, and fought the Sea Witch off like a lion tamer. She jumped and tumbled on the ground, barely avoiding fatal pinches. The twins had to cover their eyes, fearing they were about to witness the Snow Queen’s prophecy come true.

Red gave the cuttlefish one final smack with her shoe and the tentacled creature fell on the ground. Jack ran up to it and kicked it across the cave. The cuttlefish flew across the cave and hit the Sea Witch square in the face and wrapped itself tightly around her head. They could hear a loud, muffled scream as the Sea Witch struggled to free herself—a prisoner to her own pet.

"Let's get out of here!" Jack yelled.

Goldilocks jumped off the platform, somersaulting through the air, and landed near the others. The group ran through the cave and back toward where they had left the Great Sea Turtle. They retrieved their scallop shells and strapped them over their faces; then they jumped onto the turtle's back and grabbed hold of him.

"Go, turtle, go!" Conner yelled. The Great Sea Turtle might not have heard him, but he could clearly tell by their panicked faces that they needed to get out of there fast.

The turtle dove into the water and swam as fast as he could down the tunnel. He bolted past the group of sharks waiting at its entrance before they knew something was wrong. He passed all the anglerfish they had seen on their way into the cave. Their fins began to move a little quicker as they floated in the water; they could tell something wasn't right but were just waiting on orders to intervene.

The turtle swam through the canyon faster than they had ever seen a turtle swim before. For a moment the twins felt relieved—they had narrowly escaped death once again. But then a high-pitched sound boomed through the ocean, causing a ripple to travel through the water. It sounded like a scream—*the Sea Witch must have freed herself from the cuttlefish.*

Conner looked back at the canyon and had to blink twice. The Sea Witch's army of anglerfish and sharks erupted from the canyon and headed toward them like a swarm of underwater wasps. It wasn't long before the terrifying swarm caught up to them.

A few of the sharks zeroed in on the turtle. Jack was quick to punch one in the nose as it tried biting the turtle's flipper. Froggy kicked another one and it crashed into yet another—it was like an underwater car chase. A moment later the Sea Witch's creatures had gained speed and the turtle was surrounded. *They needed a miracle if they wanted to escape.*

Suddenly, a series of colorful blurs zoomed past the turtle, taking the sharks and anglerfish with them. The twins looked at each other, each making sure the other had seen it, too. More colorful blurs jetted past them one by one, picking off the creatures trying to harm the turtle. *The mermaids had come to the rescue.*

As if they were moving through a colorful meteor shower, the twins saw hundreds of mermaids shooting through the ocean and tackling the harmful fish around them. Some mermaids carried spears and shields; others shared nets. The twins found themselves in the middle of a massive underwater battle.

The turtle and his passengers had made it back into the bay. They could see the *Granny*'s belly floating on the surface above. The Great Sea Turtle surfaced next to it and Froggy quickly escorted everyone from the back of the turtle to the deck of the ship.

"Thank you!" Alex said to the giant turtle. It dipped its head slightly to her and then disappeared again beneath the water.

Alex and Conner ran down the steps to the lower deck.

"Where's the fire?" the harp asked them, but they ignored her.

Alex and Conner retrieved the Wand of Wonderment from under Goldilocks's cot. They put it on the floor and dumped out all the Sea Witch's jewels beside it. The black pearls instantly coiled around the base of the scepter, creating a handle.

"It's working! We did it!" Conner said, but his sister didn't join him in celebration. "Alex, what's wrong?"

Alex was staring down at the floor at a piece of jewelry that hadn't connected itself to the wand. She picked up the ring with the pink and blue diamonds on it that they had seen the Sea Witch wearing.

"It's the ring!" she said. *"It's the ring Bob got Mom!"*

"How do you know it's the same ring and not just a similar one?" Conner asked.

"I'm a thirteen-year-old girl—I know a ring when I see one!" Alex exclaimed.

"Does this mean *Bob* is in the Land of Stories?!" Conner asked.

A thunderous set of footsteps flew down the steps from the upper deck—it was Jack.

"Hey, you two!" Jack said. "We could use a hand up here!"

The twins put the Wand away and joined the others on the upper deck.

Just when they thought they were safe, anglerfish were jumping out of the water and landing on the ship. They snapped their massive jaws at their ankles. The twins joined Red in kicking the hideous fish overboard. Goldilocks picked up her sword and began a gruesome game of baseball with the fish flying up from the water.

Jack and Froggy tried starting up the ship, releasing the sails and firing up the flame as high as it could go.

“We’ve got to get away from the water as quickly as possible!” Jack yelled.

The *Granny* rose higher and higher above the bay.

“We’re getting away!” Red cheered, still kicking unwelcome fish off of the deck.

The ship was gaining height at a steady speed. Just when they could finally sigh with relief, an anglerfish Red and the twins had missed on the deck flopped high into the air and tore through the *Granny*’s balloon and sails with its huge teeth.

The ship began to descend out of the sky, spinning out of control. The shredded sails above them acted more as a floppy parachute than as a balloon. They couldn’t tell where they were falling—it wasn’t back into the bay, but toward land somewhere in the distance.

Everyone was screaming, grabbing on to anything or anyone they could to prevent themselves from being flung off the ship. The twins found each other’s hands in the middle of the chaos, and they held on to each other, convinced these would be their last moments alive.

With a giant thud, the *Granny* crashed to the ground. Everything was hazy from then on.… They could hear Clawdius barking.… They heard the harp yelling from below.… They heard Red and Froggy moaning.… They saw Jack and Goldilocks trying to stand.…

They looked out at the land around them and saw gigantic boulders surrounding the horizon. Two figures were moving toward them—one was small and stout, the other tall and gangly. They both had large ears and ugly faces and leaned toward the twins, inspecting them.

“Well… well… well,” said a gruff voice. “What do we have here?”

The twins had one horrifying realization before passing out completely: They had crashed in Troll and Goblin Territory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TROLLBELLA, QUEEN OF THE TROBLINS

Agentle swaying stirred the twins to life. They opened their eyes and found themselves in a caged cart traveling down a long, dark tunnel, heading deeper and deeper underground. The cart was pulled by a donkey and steered by a short and fat troll with wide, bat-like ears.

“About time you two woke up!” said the harp. She rode in the same cart as the twins.

“What happened?” Conner said, rubbing his head. He and his sister were sore, bruised, and cut up a bit from the crash.

“Our ship crashed and we’ve been kidnapped by trolls and goblins!” the harp said. “In other words, *we’re having a bad day*!”

“We’ve been kidnapped by trolls?!” Alex said. “No! This can’t be happening again!”

“Where are the others?” Conner asked.

“They’re in the cart behind us,” the harp said. “No one was seriously wounded, thank the heavens. Goldilocks dislocated her shoulder but set it back in place. Red has a scratch on her cheek and has been crying about it for hours.”

The twins looked in the tunnel behind them. Jack, Goldilocks, Froggy, and Red were squished together in a caged cart being steered by a goblin. Goldilocks was clutching her wrist, testing the reflexes throughout her hand. Red was sobbing into Froggy’s shoulder; she had a small scrape across her cheek just below her left eye.

“It’s going to take weeks to heal!” Red said. *“I’m going to look like a peasant!”*

“Where’s the wand?” Alex whispered to the harp.

“The troll took everything of value and put it in *there*,” the harp said and pointed to a satchel he wore around his shoulder. They could see Jack’s axe, Goldilocks’s sword, and the tip of the Wand poking out from the top of it.

“Are we going to be slaves now?” Conner asked in a loud and frustrated voice so the troll would hear him.

The troll let out a rumbling chuckle. “I wish,” he growled. “We don’t have slaves anymore. You lot are in for something much worse.”

Soon the carts were passing under a stone arch the twins remembered from their last visit to the underground kingdom. The stone had two statues underneath it, one of a troll and one of a goblin, and in bold letters what used to say:

BE TROLL, BE GOBLIN, OR BE AFRAID

Now read:

WELCOME, FRIENDS!

The twins rubbed their eyes to make sure they were working properly.

“Huh?” Conner said. “Are you reading what I’m reading or do I have a concussion?”

They moved through the arch and down a long stone tunnel. The twins expected to descend into the large, noisy common room they’d visited before, but everything was completely different. Instead of being filled with hundreds of trolls and goblins being served drinks and food by human slaves, the room was completely still. All the stone tables and chairs had been removed, and trolls and goblins stood attentively in perfect lines.

“That’s odd,” Conner said. “It’s like they’re at boot camp or something.”

The trolls and goblins faced an empty stone throne, all waiting for their leader’s arrival. They weren’t quite as ugly as the twins remembered, and the smell of their poor hygiene wasn’t as strong, either. Had they finally learned to take care of themselves?

The carts turned a corner and moved down another tunnel—headed for the dungeons, if the twins remembered properly. They were shocked to discover the dungeons had changed, too. The individual cells had been removed, and now there was just one big space with furniture and torches. A dozen or so humans mingled about the room. They weren’t the frail, overworked slaves the twins had seen last time, but were more a bored and restless group—yawning and twirling their thumbs.

The troll and goblin pulled the twins and other captives out of the carts and pushed them into the room with the others. They drove the carts off, taking the harp and the satchel with the Wand of Wonderment inside it with them.

"Don't let them take me away!" the harp cried. *"They're going to melt me and forge me into nose rings!"*

Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do. A large gate shut behind the carts as the troll with the magic harp drove off. Jack, Goldilocks, Red, Froggy, and the twins were trapped with the others.

"We have to get the harp and the Wand back," Jack said. He put his hands to the gate door and shook it as hard as he could, but it didn't budge.

The twins didn't look nearly as stressed as the rest of them.

"Don't worry, if we could escape this place last time, we can do it again," Conner said, once again the voice of optimism.

"Things look so much more civilized in here now," Alex said. She walked up to a woman and politely tapped her on the shoulder. "Excuse me? Hello, my name is Alex Bailey. Can you tell me what we're doing here?"

"I don't know what *you're* doing here, but *I* was kidnapped when I accidentally wandered into the Troll and Goblin Territory," she said.

"How long have you been a slave?" Conner asked.

"Slave?" Red said, and tears immediately came to her eyes—she was so distraught by the scratch on her face that the reality of the situation hadn't fully sunk in. *"Royals can't be slaves! Why is my life a reverse Cinderella story?!"*

The woman grew even more annoyed talking to them. "I'm not a slave," she said, insulted they would even think such a thing. "They just make us dance for the queen as punishment for being on their property without permission."

"They make you dance?" Alex asked. She wasn't sure she had heard her correctly.

"The Troll Queen loves watching people dance," the woman said. "So every evening after her dinner she makes her prisoners and her citizens dance with each other."

"Excuse me? Did you say *Troll Queen*?" Conner said. "What happened to the kings?"

“Don’t ask me. I’ve only been here a week,” the woman said and walked off, obviously not wanting to be bothered with questions anymore.

The twins looked around the room at the other prisoners.

“Alex? Conner?” said a voice nearby. Sitting on the ground in the back of the room was a friendly face the twins were never expecting to see in a place like this.

“Dr. Bob!” Alex gasped.

Alex and Conner were in shock and couldn’t move. Bob got to his feet and ran to the twins, giving them a long, teary-eyed embrace.

“I thought I was seeing things!” Bob said. “But it’s you—it’s actually you!”

The twins’ heads filled with so many questions they tried filtering them to the basics.

“Bob, what are you doing here?” Conner asked.

“How did you get into the fairy-tale world?” Alex said.

Bob let out a lengthy sigh. “I’ve had quite the adventure,” he said. “I was at the house when Mother Goose and the soldiers realized you were gone. A door appeared out of thin air in the living room and your grandmother appeared. While Mother Goose was explaining what had happened, I slipped through the door and have been here ever since.”

“How long have you been here?” Alex asked.

“A week or so, I think, maybe a day or two more,” Bob said.

Conner’s eyebrows shot to the top of his forehead. “You’ve been down in this dungeon for a *week*?!” he said.

“Oh no, I’ve been all over the fairy-tale continent,” Bob said. “I’ve only been in Troll and Goblin Territory for a day or two.”

Alex happily clasped her hands together. “So it *was* your ring the Sea Witch was wearing!” she said.

“Why were you with the Sea Witch, Bob?” Conner asked.

Bob looked back and forth between the twins, scared just at the sound of her name. “What were *you two* doing with the Sea Witch?” he asked.

“We’re kind of trying to save the world.… It’s a long story. But how did you go from the rental house to the bottom of an enchanted ocean?!”

“When I got to the fairy-tale world I started looking for you and your mother immediately,” he said. “I asked every villager, every farmer, and every creature I came across. No one knew who I was talking about. I

ended up getting lost in the woods—it was freezing, and there was snow on the ground."

"Sounds like the Northern Kingdom," Alex said. "Please keep going."

"Like I said, it was freezing and became dark," Bob continued. "A huge family of black bears surrounded me—I thought I was going to be eaten alive! But then the most amazing thing happened! A series of trunks and chests rained from the sky and fell on top of the bears!"

The twins side-eyed Goldilocks and Red—who shared the same stunned look on their faces.

"I don't know where they came from, but thankfully, they were full of dainty coats and scarves and jewelry," Bob said. "I wrapped myself in the clothing and was able to survive the cold night!"

"*Amazing!*" Red said through her teeth. Losing her belongings hadn't been such a waste after all, but she still was bitter about having had to toss them overboard.

Bob continued to animatedly recall his trip for the twins. "I searched the land for a few more days with no luck. I found myself in a village on the coast and was able to trade the jewels and the clothing to a sailor in exchange for a small boat. I hoped to have more luck traveling by water, so I traveled from port to port but still didn't find a trace of you two or your mother.

"I sailed through an enormous sea storm and was tipped over into the water. I was just about to drown when the Sea Witch's hideous anglerfish saved me—or at least I thought they were saving me. They brought me to her cave and stored me with the other animals they kept to feed the Sea Witch's sharks. I noticed the Sea Witch had a soft spot for jewelry and remembered I had your mother's ring in my pocket. I gave the ring to the Sea Witch in exchange for my freedom!

"I washed ashore and wandered around aimlessly for a couple days before the trolls found me," Bob said. "And now here I am, miraculously talking to you two!"

The twins were awestruck. They gawked at him with enormous eyes and wide-open mouths.

"That's an incredible story, Bob," Alex said in an almost-whisper.

"You went through all of that for Mom?" Conner asked.

“Of course,” Bob said. “I would walk to the ends of the world if I had to—*any world*. But not just your mom, for you as well.”

Alex and Conner were touched—until this moment they hadn’t realized how much Bob loved them, and it was slowly dawning on them just how much they loved him in return.

“Who might this brave man be?” Froggy asked the twins.

“This is Dr. Bob,” Conner said. “He’s our… well, he’s our *stepdad*.”

Hearing the sound of those words made Bob smile from ear to ear—he had found his family at last.

“A doctor! Thank goodness,” Red said, interrupting the sentimental moment. She showed him the scratch on her face. “On a scale of temporary to permanent, how bad is this, Doctor? Will I have to include it in my official portraits?” She braced herself for the worst.

Bob wasn’t sure how to respond. “I’d say that’ll be gone in a day or so,” Bob said and then had a look at the four adults surrounding the twins. “Who’s in your entourage, guys?”

“Oh, sorry, Bob,” Alex said. “This is Jack, Goldilocks, Froggy, and Red.”

“Queen Red Riding Hood of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom,” Red added.

Bob gave them a friendly nod. “Pleasure,” he said. “Have either of you located your mother yet?”

The twins shook their heads. “She was kidnapped by an enchantress,” Alex told him regretfully. “But we still don’t know where she is.”

“*The* Enchantress?” Bob asked. “The one everyone is talking about?”

Conner nodded his heavy head. “Unfortunately,” he said.

Bob started pacing. He looked just as worried as the twins had when they first discovered the news. “We have to find a way to save her,” he said.

“Don’t worry, that’s what we’ve been doing all this time,” Conner said. “We’re on a quest, although it’s kind of paused at the moment.”

The gate screeched open and a troll carrying a whip entered the room of prisoners.

“He’s not going to whip us, is he?” Red said and hid behind Froggy.

“Not if he knows what’s good for him,” Goldilocks said.

The troll cleared his phlegmy throat, addressing the prisoners. “The queen is almost finished with her dinner,” he growled. “It’s time to join us

for the dancing hour."

Against their will, the prisoners in the room disgruntledly followed one another through the gate and up the tunnel to the large common room. Bob, the twins, and the others stayed as close to one another as possible. When they reached the common room, all the humans were herded to the side against the wall.

A very thin goblin with a metal belt, a cape, and a staff approached the front of the room.

"That's Rigworm," Bob whispered to the twins. "He's the queen's advisor."

"Bow down, troblins," Rigworm squealed and banged his staff on the ground. "The great imperial *Queen Trollbella* approaches!"

Alex and Conner jerked their heads toward each other.

"Queen Trollbella?!" Alex said.

"You've got to be kidding me," Conner said.

A moment later, the entire room was bowing as Queen Trollbella strolled in. She was the twins' age and looked exactly as they remembered her—short, with a round face and a cute snout nose—but Trollbella had taken the title of queen very seriously.

An enormous headdress in the shape of two horns sat on her head with strings of teeth between them (the species of which no one could tell). A round ruffled collar Queen Elizabeth I of England would have been envious of was around her neck. She wore a long russet lacy dress, and on her large feet were golden slippers.

She made her way through the crowd of trolls and goblins, bobbling her head regally as she walked through her subjects. She took a seat on the stone throne at the front of the room. All the trolls and goblins looked genuinely afraid of her; even Rigworm appeared intimidated as he stood by her side. The twins had to admit, Trollbella was rather intimidating.

"How is a troll queen respected more than me?" Red asked herself out loud, and Goldilocks nudged her to be quiet.

"Thank you, troblins!" Trollbella called out. "I just had the most scrumptious dinner—hog-liver-and-acorn soup—and now I am ready to be entertained. *Now dance for me!*"

Rigworm hit the ground with his staff. A small band of trolls and goblins wheeled instruments into the room and began playing music. They

pounded on stone pianos, blew horns made of actual horns, and played on violins and cellos made of bone and spiderwebs.

The trolls and goblins standing in the center of the common room began to dance around one another in a routine they evidently had to concentrate very hard on—they had obviously thoroughly rehearsed it beforehand. Rigworm watched them intently, counting the dancing beats to himself. The twins figured he must have choreographed it.

Trollbella smiled and nodded her head to the tempo of the music. *"Dance, troblins, dance!"* she demanded and clapped her hands in delight.

As the dance progressed, the trolls and goblins started pulling the prisoners onto the floor, twirling and dipping them as part of their routine. Froggy was pulled in by a pair of ugly troll women—they blushed and giggled as they danced with him.

Red turned pink watching the troll women swing her beau around. A goblin tried to grab Goldilocks's hand but she shot him a nasty look that scared him off.

The troll that had captured the twins carried the magic harp into the room and set her beside the band. The twins could see he still had his satchel around his shoulder containing the wand.

"What is *this*?!" Trollbella said and excitedly kicked her feet at the throne.

"A gift for you, My Queen," the troll said and bowed to her. "We acquired it this afternoon for you."

"By acquired he means *kidnapped*!" the harp shouted.

"Someone play the shiny woman!" Trollbella ordered. "I want to hear the sounds of her strings!"

One of the goblins playing in the band tossed his violin aside and began playing the harp. The harp burst out laughing—it tickled her.

"Oooo-hoo-hoo, stop that!" the harp cried. *"That tickles! Oooo-hoo! Be gentle; it's been a while!"*

The trolls and goblins in the center of the room stopped for a moment and watched as the harp was played against her will.

Trollbella squinted at them. "Did I *say* you could stop dancing?" she yelled from her throne.

Rigworm slammed his staff on the ground and the trolls and goblins immediately picked up dancing where they had left off.

The group of prisoners to the side was getting smaller and smaller as more of them were being incorporated into the dance. Conner was hiding behind the ones who were left. He didn't want to dance but even more so didn't want Trollbella to see him.

As the dance went on, Jack, Goldilocks, Froggy, Red, Alex, and Bob were all pulled into it, one by one, and twirled around. Conner was the only one left and stood alone. Trollbella gazed around the room, pleased by all the dancing, and her eyes finally landed on Conner. The Troll Queen screamed. Her mouth opened and her eyes grew twice in size.

"Stop the music!" Trollbella ordered, and the band went mute immediately. She clutched her chest over a rapidly beating heart. *"My Butterboy has returned!"* she gasped.

Conner cringed. "Hi, Trollbella," he said and awkwardly waved at her.

Trollbella was beside herself with excitement. "I knew you would come back to me one day, Butterboy," she said softly, almost in a trance. "I have waited ever so long for this moment."

"Ah, well, *here I am*," Conner said, blinking uncomfortably slowly.

Although the music had stopped, a thousand-piece symphony seemed to be playing in Trollbella's mind. *"Bring me my Butterboy bust!"* she ordered.

A couple trolls wheeled a very heavy cart into the center of the common room. A giant stone bust of Conner's face, sculpted to perfection, was on the back of it.

"Is that *me*?!" Conner asked, horrified to see the massive replica of himself.

Trollbella hopped off her throne and place a hand on the bust's cheek. "I made it myself. I look at it every day we're apart," she said dreamily. "But you look so different now, Butterboy. You've gotten taller, handsomer—you're my Butter*man* now!"

Trollbella walked toward the real Conner like a lioness approaching her mate. Her heart was practically fluttering out of her body. She threw her arms around him and squeezed him as tightly as she could.

Conner looked up at his sister. *"Help me!"* he mouthed at her. Alex only shrugged at him. What could she do?

"I need slow music so I can dance with my Butterboy!" Trollbella ordered. *"Now, troblins, now!"*

The band started a slow, romantic melody. Trollbella danced with Conner to the music—rather, she moved him around the room and he followed.

“Trollbella, what is a troblin?” Conner asked.

“It’s what I renamed my people when I became queen,” Trollbella said and rested her head on Conner’s chest as they swayed. Her headdress almost poked him in the eye. “The Goblin King didn’t have an heir so I inherited both thrones and combined them.”

“What happened to the Troll King and Goblin King?” Conner asked.

“Rocks fell and they died,” Trollbella said simply. “It was tragic, it was messy—environmental hazards when you live in an underground kingdom.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Conner said, not sure whether Trollbella was saddened by the incident.

Trollbella shrugged happily. “But at least I’m queen now,” she said. “And a great queen I have been for my troblins. We’ve had a bad reputation for so long. I’ve tried restoring honor and class by making them bathe and dance.”

“You’ve done a nice job,” Conner said.

“But I do get so lonely down here,” Trollbella said and looked into his eyes. “I long to be married and start a troblin family of my own someday. Oh, Butterboy, won’t you please be my *Butterking*?!”

The entire room went silent at the sudden and unexpected proposal. Alex slapped her hands over her face.

“King?” Conner exclaimed. “Me? Of the trolls and goblins?”

Trollbella silenced him with her index finger. “Shhh, Butterboy,” she said calmly. “I know we’ve only been reunited for a mere three minutes, but I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life. It’s a tremendous honor to be my husband, I know, but let the idea sink in and accept it. Embrace it. *Love it*.”

Trollbella was so much more powerful now, Conner was terrified of what she might do to him or his friends if he turned her down.

“Trollbella, I… I… I…” he said with difficulty.

“I believe the word you’re looking for is *yes*,” Trollbella said.

Conner was saved by a bright violet flash that suddenly filled the room. A large hourglass covered in vines and thorns appeared in the center

of the floor. It had purple sand that was falling quickly into its base—whatever it was timing was going to happen in a matter of seconds.

"What is that?" Conner asked.

Trollbella rolled her eyes at the hourglass. "Oh, don't worry about that, Butterboy," she said. "That's just from the Enchantress."

"The Enchantress?!" Conner yelled. "Why is the Enchantress sending you an hourglass?"

Trollbella tried waving the subject off like it wasn't important. "She visited me yesterday," she said, as if it wasn't a big deal. "She was trying to get me to surrender my kingdom to her. Apparently she's trying to take over the world or something. I wasn't listening—she was interrupting my dancing time."

"What else did she say?" Conner asked.

"She said the Elf Empire had surrendered to her already," Trollbella said. "The elves are still mad they weren't included in the very first Happily Ever After Assembly. The Enchantress figured since the trolls and goblins have *never* been included, we would want to surrender willingly, too."

"Did you surrender?" Conner asked.

"Of course not," Trollbella said. "It was dancing time! *Nobody* interrupts my dancing time."

"Did she threaten you with anything?" Conner asked her. She was a difficult troll to get information out of.

Trollbella thought about it. "Oh, she did say I had a day to think about it or she would cause horrible destruction to my kingdom," she said blankly.

"Well, aren't you worried she will?" Conner said.

"I live in a big hole with trolls and goblins," Trollbella said. "What is worse than that?"

Alex ran up to the small queen. "Trollbella! We have to get everyone out of here as quickly as possible!"

It was the first time Trollbella had realized Alex was in the room. She couldn't remember why she didn't like her—but the feeling was just as strong as ever.

"You?" Trollbella yelled and then gave Conner a dirty look. "You're still hanging around *her*, Butterboy?!"

"She's my *sister*!" Conner yelled. That never mattered to Trollbella; every other girl was a threat when it came to her Butterboy.

The purple sand was going fast. “We have to get out of here before the Enchantress attacks!” Alex desperately declared to the room.

“What do you think the Enchantress is going to do?!” Froggy asked.

“I’m not certain, but I have an idea,” Alex said. “And I pray I’m wrong.”

The final grain of the hourglass’s purple sand fell into the base. *Time was up.* A thunderous rumble caused the common room to shake. Something monstrous was headed their way.

“What’s happening?” Red yelled.

She turned toward the stone entrance tunnel and the whole room turned with her. A gigantic tidal wave was hurtling toward them. “I was right,” Alex whispered to herself. *“Ezmia is flooding the kingdom!”*

The trolls, goblins, and humans screamed at the oncoming water. There was no time to waste. They had to do something fast or the water was going to crush and drown the entire kingdom.

Alex ran to the troll with the satchel over his shoulder and yanked it off him. She ran toward the rushing wave, digging in the satchel as she ran. She found the wand and brushed all the items off it into the bag until it was just an ice scepter again.

Alex pointed the scepter at the rushing water. An icy blast erupted from the tip of the scepter and shot straight into the water. The tidal wave slowed into a big icy wall yards away from where Alex stood.

The trolls and goblins cheered. “The Squishygirl has saved us all,” Trollbella said quietly with wide eyes.

“You’re a genius!” Conner yelled proudly to his sister. She looked back to him and they shared a smile—but it wasn’t over yet.

The wall of ice began to crack and snap as more water flowed in behind it.

“We need to get out of here!” Alex yelled. *“The wall isn’t going to hold the water back forever!”*

Rigworm slammed his staff on the ground. “Everyone follow me to the back tunnels!” he yelled and the troblins stampeded behind him out of the room.

The band abandoned their instruments, including the magic harp, and ran with the others.

“Don’t leave me!” the harp said.

Jack and Froggy hoisted the harp over their shoulders and followed the others out of the common room with Red at their tail.

“My apologies, Your Majesty,” Goldilocks said and scooped up Trollbella like a baby doll.

“I love you, Butterboy!” Trollbella called back to Conner as Goldilocks carried her off.

Alex and Conner stayed behind. Alex was blasting the scepter, reinforcing the icy wall as it swelled under the pressure of the water behind it.

“Alex! Conner!” Bob said. “We have to get out of here before it’s too late!”

“They need time to escape!” Alex said. “I have to keep the wall up so they have a chance! Go! Save yourselves!”

Alex was holding the scepter like a flamethrower, freezing the water as it crept closer and closer. She squeezed it harder and an even stronger blast shot out of it. Conner had to grab hold of it, too, so it didn’t knock her over. *Every second counted.*

Finally, the pressure was too much for the scepter to hold off, and the water rushed toward them. Bob pulled the twins in the direction the others had gone, and the three of them ran for their lives.

They ran up the tunnel the others had escaped into with the water chasing them. Luckily, the Troll and Goblin Territory was like a giant ant colony—the water had other places to go besides after them—but the underground kingdom filled quickly and the water swirled violently toward the twins. They were running as fast as their legs could carry them, but the water caught up with them and they were engulfed.

Bob and the twins shot out of the ground as if they had been stuck in a whale’s blowhole. They landed hard on grassy dirt somewhere outside the territory. They were soaking wet and coughing up water they had swallowed.

The twins and Bob got to their feet and had a look around at wherever they were. They were standing in a field on the edge of a forest. The entire troll and goblin race was spread out across the field with Jack, Goldilocks, Red, Froggy, and the harp sprinkled between them. They moaned and panted and held on to the loved ones they had nearly lost.

It looked like something the twins would have seen on the news after a natural disaster had occurred.

“Where are we?” Alex asked.

“Does it matter?” Conner asked. “We’re alive.”

The twins and their friends gathered together in the center of the field.

“That was a very brave thing you did back there,” Jack said and placed a grateful hand on Alex’s shoulder.

“You saved our lives, Alex,” Goldilocks said.

Trollbella strolled up to Alex. Her headdress had been knocked off and her blonde pigtails were exposed. “You saved me and my troblins, Squishygirl,” she said. “We will forever be grateful.”

All Alex could do was nod, overwhelmed by the gratitude she was receiving. She dumped out the satchel and all their belongings the troll had briefly stolen from them fell on the ground. Jack took his axe and Goldilocks took her sword. Alex watched as the Wand of Wonderment reconfigured itself as the pieces of mirror, the scepter, the stepmother’s ring, and the Sea Witch’s pearls were reunited.

“A whole kingdom has been ruined but it looks like something can be salvaged,” Alex said. She picked up her mother’s silver engagement ring off the ground and handed it to Bob.

It gave them hope that everything hadn’t been lost.

Jack led a group of troll and goblin men into the woods and returned with firewood. They set up a series of campfires for the night. Bob walked around and inspected anyone that had been injured in the escape, although he was a little confused by troll and goblin anatomy—some four-toed feet weren’t actually missing any toes.

Everyone slept on the ground that night. The next day, the *Granny*’s crash site was discovered not too far away from the trolls’ and goblins’ camp. The ship’s damage was irreparable, so they stripped it apart and used the pieces of woven wood and stitched fabric to create tents for the campers.

While Jack was helping the trolls and goblins tear the ship apart, he found Clawdius hiding in the destruction. Jack brought him back to the camp and he was reunited with Red.

“Oh, Clawdius! There you are!” Red said happily. “I was worried sick! I was afraid you had been gobbled up by a… a… well, a relative or

something!”

They configured a tent for their group of eight (nine, including Clawdius) to sleep under. Trollbella insisted on putting her tent as close as possible to the one Conner slept in. She talked openly about their future wedding, although he had never given her an answer to her proposal.

“Trollbella, you and all the troblins just lost a kingdom,” he said. “I think you have bigger things to worry about.”

“You are so wise, Butterboy,” Trollbella said. “And someday you will make a wonderful Butterking.”

Trollbella was homeless, but still not hopeless.

Jack, Goldilocks, Red, Froggy, Bob, and the twins sat around a campfire that evening. They were feeling pretty dismal after witnessing the Enchantress’s attempt to kill an entire kingdom.

“Where do we go now?” Goldilocks asked. “We’ve collected everything except what we need from the Enchantress.”

“And no one has any clue where she is?” Bob asked.

“No,” Jack said. “But as soon as we do, it’ll be our next stop.”

Conner grew tired of hearing the same pointless questions being asked.

“I’m going for a walk,” he said. “I need to clear my head.”

“I’ll go with you,” Alex said. “Some air will do us some good.”

The twins walked into the trees beside the campground. It was nice to have time away from the others and vent to each other.

“She’s such a monster,” Alex said under her breath. “I don’t think I’ve ever hated someone as much as I hate the Enchantress.”

“I never thought one person was capable of so much damage,” Conner said. “When are we going to have the answers we need to get rid of this wench? I’m so sick of asking questions!”

Something began moving between the trees in the distance. The twins looked up and saw a familiar ghostly woman floating toward them.

“It’s the Lady of the East!” Alex said.

The ghost hovered in front of them. Conner took an angry step toward her. He wasn’t afraid of the spirit anymore but had grown very frustrated by her appearance.

“What do you want from us?” he yelled.

The ghost didn’t respond. She just stared at the twins silently, as she always did.

“Habla inglés?” Conner tried with a horrible accent.

“Conner, I don’t think she speaks *Spanish*,” Alex reprimanded.

“WHAT. DO. YOU. WANT?” Conner shouted.

The ghost raised her hand and pointed to the east.

“Yes, we get it, you’re from the East!” Conner said. “Listen, Ghost Lady, we’ve got a lot on our plate right now. Unless you can help us, please go haunt someone else.”

The ghost looked back and forth between the twins and nodded. She turned around and floated off into the trees but stopped to look back at them. It was the most the twins had ever seen her move.

“I think she wants us to follow her,” Alex said. “I think she wants to help.”

The ghost nodded again and then floated off into the distance.

“Why are ghosts so passive-aggressive?” Conner asked.

“Let’s follow her,” Alex said with a shrug. “What do we have to lose?”

Conner eyed the ghost nervously. “You better not be taking us on a *wild ghost chase*!”

The twins followed the spirit through the trees and into the East. They had no idea where she was taking them or how long they would be gone, but the twins hoped wherever they were going, they would find the answers they needed.

It was a few hours past sunset and the magic harp had the tent all to herself. The twins had gone for a walk and the others were gathered around the campfire just outside, quietly talking among themselves.

The harp gazed through a tear in the tent at the trolls and goblins camping around her. Even though they had kidnapped her and forced her to play music, she couldn’t help but feel sorry for them. No creature deserved to have its home destroyed in such a merciless manner. She wished there was a way she could help the twins stop the Enchantress—except for the obvious one.

The Wand of Wonderment was resting on a tree stump on the ground in front of the harp. She had been keeping as much distance from the Wand

as possible. Every time she saw it, a strange, alluring sensation swept through her, as if she was being magnetically drawn to it. The harp knew she was meant to be a part of the Wand—she just worried what her incorporation would cost her.

"So tragic," said an airy voice in the tent. "I gave the Troll Queen a proper warning, so she only has herself to blame."

The harp turned to see who had snuck into the tent behind her and she saw a face she hadn't seen in more than a hundred years.

"Ezmia," the harp said.

"Hello, Gloria," the Enchantress said. "It's been ages since the last time I saw you. You look wonderful—haven't aged a day! Then again, I suppose that's one of the perks of being made of gold."

The harp was neither timid nor scared. Unbeknownst to the others, the harp and the Enchantress had a history together.

"You should know," the harp said crossly. "Or has your memory spoiled as much as your soul? You're the one who transformed me into this instrument."

"Was that *me*?" Ezmia said and playfully gestured to herself.

"The Musician fell in love with me and left you. You turned me into an object and captured his soul so I would be forced to live forever and spend eternity without him."

"How cruel," Ezmia said. "Sounds like something I would do, though."

If the harp had had tear ducts, Ezmia would have caused tears to roll down her golden face. "Why are you here, Ezmia?" the harp said. "Are you tallying all the lives you've ruined?"

The Enchantress smiled malevolently. "No, I came to see that expression on your face. I've waited over a hundred years to see those eyes fill with the bleakness of seeing your whole world crumble around you," she said. "Because you were responsible for putting that same look into my eyes once."

"You still blame me for the *Musician's* mistake?" the harp said.

"Oh, please, the fault was shared," Ezmia said. "You let him pursue you even though you knew it was breaking my heart. You didn't think hurting me would have a consequence, because, like the rest of the world, you thought I was powerful in ability but weak in spirit."

“And now are you satisfied?” the harp asked. “Now that you’ve shown the world the evil you’re capable of, have you found your peace?”

“I may not be fully satisfied yet, but I will be soon,” Ezmia said. “I have big plans for this world.”

The harp shook her head, almost pitying the Enchantress. “No, Ezmia, you’ll never be satisfied,” she said. “You think by robbing other people of their bliss you’ll find your own, but it doesn’t work that way. You’ll be searching for happiness your entire life but will never find it because you wouldn’t know what happiness was even if it scratched you in the face.”

The Enchantress’s eyes grew wide with anger. Her hair was rapidly flowing above her like an aggressive flame. The harp might have infuriated her, but she was delighted by the feeling. Ezmia smiled as her spirit absorbed the emotion and her body became stronger.

“Thank you,” Ezmia said. “I have a big day tomorrow and needed that extra boost. But one thing before I go—if I do search for bliss forever, I’m so glad you’ll be around to see it.”

The Enchantress vanished from the tent without a trace. The remark was like a knife in the heart to the harp. She couldn’t bear the thought of watching Ezmia’s wrath evolve for all time.

She looked down at the Wand of Wonderment and reached toward it. She was ready to sacrifice whatever she had to so Ezmia didn’t win.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE EIGHTH DWARF

Ahorrible storm moved through the Dwarf Forests. Rain poured down in massive amounts, trees bent in the violent wind, and thunder roared across the land. It was as if Mother Nature was mourning.

The Seven Dwarfs were nestled warmly in their cottage. They played a game of cards and enjoyed some hot cocoa at their table while they waited out the storm. It was almost midnight when an unexpected knock came from their door.

The dwarfs were very curious as to who would be visiting them so late in the night during such a harsh storm. In fact, the last person to knock on their door had been Queen Snow White herself when she was just a young princess trying to hide from the Evil Queen.

The Oldest Dwarf stood from the table and opened the door. He was taken aback by who their guest turned out to be. Standing on their doorstep, soaked to the bone in a dark cloak, was the Seven Dwarfs' youngest brother.

"Hello," Rumpelstiltskin said.

"Well, I'll be an elf 's mistress," the Oldest Dwarf said. It had been one hundred and twenty-seven years since the dwarfs had seen their youngest brother.

"Rumpelstiltskin, is that you?" said the Shortest Dwarf, and he stood from the table.

"It's me, brother," Rumpelstiltskin said. "May I come in?"

The Oldest hesitated at first, but because the weather was so horrid he decided it would be cruel of him not to let his brother in. Rumpelstiltskin took a step inside his old home and the Oldest shut the door behind him.

"It's a beast out there," he said with a shiver. All seven of his brothers scowled at him, not welcoming his return home. "Playing with the old deck, I see. I always loved it when we played cards through a storm."

His brothers stared at the floor or at their hand of cards, although none of them were playing anymore.

"I saw the smoke from your chimney," Rumpelstiltskin said. "It guided me here through the storm. Thank goodness it did, otherwise I would still

be out there trotting through the rain."

"Why are you here?" the Largest Dwarf asked him.

Rumpelstiltskin looked at his hands while he formed the words. "I snuck away while the Enchantress was out. I'm sure you've heard, but she is taking over the world," he said.

The Oldest Dwarf hooted under his breath in disgust and had a seat at the table. Rumpelstiltskin knew it was aimed at him.

"She isn't very clear about her plans for the Dwarf Forests, as it has no ruler to conquer, but I think she is planning on obliterating them completely," he said. "I'm fairly close to her, as close as anyone could be, and was hoping with your permission I could ask her to spare you when she takes over."

"And why would you do that?" asked the Thinnest Dwarf.

Rumpelstiltskin was hurt he had to be asked. "Because we're *family*," he said.

The Oldest angrily threw his cards on the table. "We *were* family," he said. "You abandoned this family a long time ago when you decided we weren't good enough for you. And what did you leave us for? To kidnap children for evil fairies? To spend a lifetime in prison? How dare you call yourself a dwarf or say the word *family* under this roof! Mother and Father would be ashamed of you if they were still alive."

Rumpelstiltskin lowered his head. "I was so unhappy," he said. "I didn't know what I wanted; I just knew it wasn't the life of a miner."

"So, have you found it, then?" the Shortest Dwarf asked. "Is running around doing the evil Enchantress's grunt work been everything you were hoping for?"

Rumpelstiltskin closed his eyes; he was hoping the conversation wouldn't get to this.

"I'm sorry for the embarrassment I brought to this family," he said. "And believe me, not a day goes by that I don't wish to erase the past. I would love nothing more than to get rid of my affiliation with her, but I'm afraid I can't, all because of one mistake I made years ago."

The Oldest Dwarf shuffled his cards. "Well, it was *your* mistake and not ours," he said. "We'll have nothing to do with it. You can tell the Enchantress that we would rather die than live in a world ruled by her."

Rumpelstiltskin looked to his other brothers but the answer seemed to be unanimous.

“I see,” he said. “Well, at least I tried.”

He headed to the door and pulled it open. The strong winds from outside instantly filled the cottage. Rumpelstiltskin turned back to his brothers before he left; he had one final thing to say.

“I’m sorry I could never be the brother you wanted,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “But one day I’ll make things right between us. One day I’ll be a brother you can be proud of.”

Rumpelstiltskin stepped into the storm and shut the cottage door behind him, knowing it could very well be the last thing he ever said to them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE LADY OF THE EAST

The twins followed the ghost for hours and hours across the land. They traveled through a series of forests, over streams, and across grassy hills as they voyaged farther and farther, following the spirit into the East. Occasionally the ghost would look back at the twins to make sure they were still following her and wait for them to catch up before proceeding.

Eventually, they arrived at a large river that marked the Eastern Kingdom's border. At least, the twins assumed it was the border, since everything on the opposite side was consumed in thornbushes and vines.

"She's crazy if she thinks we're going in there," Conner said.

The Lady of the East floated upstream to a large maple tree. She lingered by its roots until the twins met her there. She pointed to the ground and the twins saw a small circular door hidden in the dirt. Conner pulled it open and discovered a ladder leading down into a narrow tunnel.

"It's a secret passage!" Alex said.

"Are we supposed to go in there?" Conner asked the ghost.

The Lady of the East slowly nodded her head. She retracted into a small, ghostly orb and flew into the passage. Alex and Conner followed her, cautiously making their way down the ladder. The tunnel was dark and dingy. The orb gave off the only light, and the twins followed it like the North Star as it continued leading them east underground.

The dirt surrounding them became moist and muddy as they traveled below the river.

"She seems to know where she's going," Conner said.

"This must be a secret entrance into the Eastern Kingdom," Alex said. "Something tells me we're the only ones who have been in here for a very long time."

There were no footprints or a single insect or rodent in sight. The twins were led through the tunnel for miles and miles. Their feet grew tired and ached a little more with every step.

"Are we there yet?" Conner asked the orb, but he didn't get an answer.

Finally, the tunnel came to an end at another ladder. Alex and Conner climbed up the ladder and peeked through another circular door above it.

They pushed the door open and climbed out of the passage.

The twins found themselves in a square room with hay covering the ground and spacious wooden stalls built around the walls.

“Looks like we’re in a stable,” Conner said.

“Then where are all the horses?” Alex asked.

The orb expanded back into the Lady of the East. She glided across the stable and through a pair of open wooden doors. Alex and Conner followed her again, peering through the doors before walking through them. They found a stone spiral staircase that twisted high above them.

“Conner, I think we’re in Sleeping Beauty’s castle,” Alex said.

The Lady of the East glared at them from the stairs.

“We’re coming, we’re coming,” Conner said.

The twins followed the ghost up the stone steps, climbing higher and higher into the castle. They finally reached one of the highest floors and followed the Lady of the East down a hallway with stained-glass windows. The windows were dark, though—as if something was covering them from the other side.

They passed a window with an unobstructed view and looked out at the rest of the castle and the land surrounding it. Alex shrieked and grabbed her brother’s arm.

“Oh my gosh,” she said and covered her mouth.

“Whoa,” Conner said under his breath.

The castle was so consumed by the Enchantress’s plants it looked like it was one large plant itself. The thornbushes and vines had wrapped around the castle, leaving nothing uncovered. The twins saw soldiers and servants and villagers spread across the land with vines coiled around them like serpents covering their prey. Some were pinned to the ground, while others were suspended hundreds of feet in the air over the castle—like ornaments on a monstrous Christmas tree.

“You don’t see something like that every day,” Conner said softly.

The twins turned to the Lady of the East. She floated farther down the hall and phased through a door. Alex and Conner opened the door and walked into the room, but the ghost had vanished. They looked around at the room they had just entered, and a large luxurious four-poster bed pushed against the wall caught their eye—they were in the king and queen’s chambers.

“Who are you?” a deep voice called out. King Chase was seated by a fireplace, keeping warm. The twins jumped when they saw him.

“So sorry to disturb you!” Alex said. “We didn’t realize we were walking into your private chambers.”

The king studied them curiously. “How did you get into the castle?” he asked.

“We were following someone,” Alex said.

“Who?” King Chase asked.

Neither of the twins had an answer. “Well, we’re not sure who she is exactly,” Alex said.

“A pushy ghost, that’s who,” Conner said under his breath. “She led us through a secret tunnel.”

The twins expected the king to look at them like they were crazy, but he did the opposite. “A ghost?” King Chase said. “Is this ghost by chance the spirit of a woman with a flower in her hair?”

“Yes!” Alex said. “Do you know who she is?”

King Chase nodded. “You must have been following the ghost of Old Queen Beauty. She’s been haunting this castle for years.”

“Queen Beauty?” Conner asked with a confused face. “But we just saw your wife last week—she’s alive.”

King Chase rested his head on the back of his chair and let out a long sigh of relief. “I am glad to hear that,” he said. “I haven’t seen or heard from her since she fled the castle—no one has been able to get in or out since the plants attacked.”

“So there are two Queen Beautys?” Conner asked.

King Chase stood and walked to a portrait on the wall. It was of a beautiful woman—unmistakably the Lady of the East when she had been alive.

“The ghost is the spirit of my wife’s grandmother, Queen Beauty the First, who she was named after,” King Chase explained. “Historically speaking, my wife is Queen Beauty the Second; the world just knows her as Sleeping Beauty.”

“That’s why she looked so familiar,” Conner said. “Sleeping Beauty looks just like her grandmother!”

“The ghost only reveals herself to people she thinks can help in a time of need,” King Chase said and eyed the twins. “I should know—I would

have never kissed Sleeping Beauty and broken the sleeping curse if Queen Beauty hadn't been there to guide me to this castle."

"Interesting," Alex said and studied the portrait.

Beside it was another painting of Queen Beauty standing next to a large animal of some kind. It had thick fur, large claws, and a mane like a lion's.

Wait a second—Beauty *!* Alex thought. "Is Old Queen Beauty *the Beauty* from the story of *Beauty and the Beast*?"

"Indeed," said a woman's voice. The twins and King Chase turned to see the ghost of Old Queen Beauty floating toward them. "I came to live in the castle when I was a very young woman. I was meant to settle my father's debt with a king cursed to live as hideous beast, but when I fell in love with him the curse was lifted and he became human again."

The twins froze. "You can talk?" Conner asked. "Might have been nice if you explained some of this the *first time* you scared the crap out of us!"

"I apologize for my methods getting you here," Beauty said. "I can only speak when I am in my old home."

Alex was fascinated by the heritage and silently thought on it, trying to make sense of it all.

"So there were two curses in this castle broken by an act of love," Alex said. "What a coincidence."

"That is not a coincidence at all, I'm afraid," Beauty said. "The curses were cast by the same person. *Ezmia*."

Both the twins shook their head in disbelief. They weren't expecting this twist in the story.

"Hold on," Conner said. "*Ezmia* is who turned your husband into the beast?"

The ghost nodded somberly. "Yes," she said. "You see, Ezmia fell in love with my husband long before I met him. When he could not reciprocate her love, she cursed him, thinking no one could ever love a beast."

"And then you broke the spell and years later she cursed your granddaughter," Alex asked.

"Guess she didn't like the name *Beauty*," Conner said with a shrug.

"The Enchantress has cursed every generation of my family," Beauty told them. "She bewitched my son into desiring a wife who could spin hay

into gold. He eventually found a maiden who claimed to do so, but only because she made a deal with Rumpelstiltskin to do it for her."

"And Rumpelstiltskin was working for Ezmia at the time," Conner said, piecing everything together. "He spun the hay into gold in exchange for her firstborn child."

"Wait, there's a theme in Ezmia's attacks on your family," Alex said. "They all involve a spinning wheel. But why?"

"Before I came to live in the castle with the beast, my sisters and I spun thread in the village nearby," Beauty said. "Ezmia couldn't stand the fact that my husband chose to love a *spinner* rather than a great fairy like herself. She has forced the spinning wheel upon my family since."

"That takes a lot of effort," Conner said. "Why would she put so much energy into cursing your family because of something that happened so long ago?"

The twins could almost see a small smile appear on the ghost's face—the twins were following her story perfectly.

"Because the Enchantress, above all things, values her *pride*," Beauty said. "And my family has always been a reminder of Ezmia's greatest loss and embarrassment."

The twins felt their hearts skip a beat.

"Her *pride*!" Alex said. "That's it! That's the Enchantress's most prized possession!"

"That's why you brought us here, isn't it?" Conner asked Beauty. "You knew what we needed!"

The ghost of Old Queen Beauty nodded again. King Chase was just as caught up in her story as the twins were—still learning things about the family he married into.

"I have a question," King Chase said. "Is that why you haunt this castle still? Because you're protecting your family against the Enchantress?"

The ghost dismally lowered her head. "In her scheme to take over the world, the Enchantress imprisoned my husband's soul just as she has your grandmother," Beauty said to the twins. "I've walked the earth waiting for his soul to be free so I can be reunited with him on the other side."

"What's up with all the souls?" Conner asked. "Can't she collect stamps or antiques like a normal person?"

“I’m afraid I don’t have the answer to that question,” Beauty said. “But I’ve asked someone who will to join us.”

The ghost of Old Queen Beauty gestured behind them to the fireplace. Another spirit stepped out from the smoke of the tiny flames. It was the ghost of a short woman who wore a hooded cloak and walked hunched over with a cane. Her face was so wrinkled she looked like a log. She had an incredibly small nose with an enormous mole next to it.

The twins knew who she was without any introduction. Their father had described her perfectly in the journal they followed a year ago.

“Hagatha?” Alex asked. “Is that *you*?”

“Aye,” Hagatha said and slowly made her way closer to them.

“Do you know why the Enchantress is collecting souls?” Conner cautiously asked her.

“Aye,” Hagatha said. “It’s what she needs to create a portal into the Otherworld.”

“What?!” Alex asked breathlessly. “What do you mean, ‘the Otherworld’?”

“The Enchantress never wanted just *this* world, she always planned on taking over the Otherworld as well,” Hagatha said. “It’s her home—it’s where she was born. It’s where her family was killed.”

The twins couldn’t believe what they were hearing. As if the stakes weren’t high enough already, learning that the Enchantress wanted to take over their world, too, made them sick to their stomachs. Their quest suddenly became a mission to save two worlds.

The mayhem she could cause in the Otherworld would be catastrophic compared to the havoc she had committed here.

“But our grandmother is the only person who can travel between worlds,” Alex said.

Hagatha and Beauty exchanged a remorseful look. “There is another way,” Hagatha said. “It’s something I learned when I was a young witch. It was such an extreme spell I never thought anyone would be crazy enough to attempt it—until I met Ezmia.”

“And you gave it to her?” Alex asked.

“I met her when she was still a fairy in good standing,” Hagatha said in her own defense. “She had been heartbroken a number of times and asked me if I knew how to create a portal so she could go home to the Otherworld.

And, not thinking much of it, I made the biggest mistake of my life—*I told her*."

"What was it?" Conner asked.

Hagatha let out a long sigh. "To travel into the Otherworld you must first master the seven deadly sins of this world and conquer its past, present, and future," she said.

It was the most intense collecting spell the twins had ever heard of. "She has to master the seven deadly sins?" Alex asked.

"And conquer this world's past, present, and future?" Conner said. "How does someone do that?"

"Ezmia has spent a long time figuring it out, and unfortunately she's very close to completing it," Hagatha said.

"What are the seven deadly sins again?" Conner asked his sister.

Alex had to think about it. "Lust, envy, pride, greed, gluttony, sloth, and wrath, I believe," she said.

Conner gulped. "Sounds like the Enchantress, all right," he said. "And you said she's close to accomplishing all of that, Hagatha?"

The ghost of the old witch nodded. "Ezmia has imprisoned the souls of her former loves to signify her *lust*. She strips others of their happiness to signify her *envy*. Having Rumpelstiltskin under her command connotes her *sloth*. And as she slowly takes over this world with *greed* and *gluttony*, the world is exposed to the Enchantress's *wrath*, satisfying her *pride*," Hagatha said.

"But how is she conquering this world's past, present, and future?" Alex asked.

"By destroying the kingdom's historical landmarks the Enchantress conquers the *past*," Hagatha explained. "By forcing the rulers to hand over their thrones willingly, Ezmia undeniably holds the power over the *present*. And by kidnapping the heir to a throne of man and the heir to a throne of magic, she encompasses the *future*."

The twins bobbed their heads up and down as they followed along. They looked to King Chase but he was having an even harder time comprehending it all. Every move Ezmia had made from the very beginning had been carefully calculated.

"Princess Hope is the heir to a throne of man," Conner said. "That's why Ezmia kidnapped her and tried kidnapping Sleeping Beauty as a

baby!”

“But who is the heir to the throne of magic?” Alex asked.

“*That* is where the Enchantress has made her greatest mistake,” Hagatha said, happy to tell them about one advantage they had over the Enchantress. “She has taken the wrong person.”

The twins didn’t understand what she was telling them at first. Conner looked to his sister as it slowly dawned on him. Alex realized everyone in the room was looking at her.

“*Me?”* Alex asked and pointed to herself. “That’s why the Enchantress wanted to kidnap me? She thinks I’m some sort of heir to *magic*?”

“Technically, you are the Fairy Godmother’s only heir,” Conner said.

“You’re her grandchild, too,” Alex reminded him. “Shouldn’t you qualify as much as me?”

Conner shook his head. “Come on, Alex,” he said. “You know I’ve never wanted to be a fairy. This has always been *your* thing.”

Alex shook her head and looked to the floor, not wanting to believe it. “No, there has to be some sort of mistake,” she said. “I want to be a fairy as much as the next girl—but I can’t be the *next Fairy Godmother*.”

“Didn’t the unicorns bow to you when you came to this world?” Beauty asked.

“Well, yes, but what does that have to do with anything?” Alex asked.

“The unicorns only bow to those that magic is strong with,” Hagatha said. “Ezmia knew that if anyone could stop her, it would be another woman of both worlds with magic in her blood.”

“Which is why Grandma made such a big deal about protecting us,” Conner said. “She knew Ezmia would be coming after you! I bet she’s known you were going to fill her shoes since you activated her *Land of Stories* book.”

Alex kept trying to deny it to herself, but what they were saying was making sense. It was such a huge reality to face, but an even bigger burden to bear. Had the situation been different, it would have been the most wonderful news she had ever heard in her life, but they were talking as if she was now single-handedly responsible for defeating the Enchantress.

“You have to get back to the others,” said another voice in the room. They all turned to see a third ghost appear. She was young and pretty, but shy and kept her distance. There was something about her presence and her

voice that was so familiar to the twins, but they had so many things to think about, they couldn't think exactly who she reminded them of.

"This room is getting more crowded by the minute," Conner said. "Who are *you*?"

The new ghost took a moment to answer, as if she wanted to remain anonymous. "They called me Gloria when I was alive," she said, but quickly changed the subject. "You've been gone for hours and your friends have started to worry. The Enchantress is planning another attack soon—you must return to them and finish building the Wand."

"Wait, how do you know about the Wand?" Conner asked.

The ghost of Gloria went quiet. "I know you are much closer to finishing it than you think," she said softly, almost sad to say it. "Now you must hurry—Ezmia is planning to strike very soon."

"She's right," Beauty said. She floated past the twins and headed to the door. "It's time you headed back to the troll and goblin camp."

The twins nodded, not wanting to cause Bob and the others to worry any more than they had already.

"Children," King Chase said before they left his room, "if you see my wife, please tell her I love her."

"No," Conner said. "But you can tell her yourself when you see her next."

He and King Chase shared a hopeful smile.

"Best of luck to you both," the king said.

The twins followed the ghost of Old Queen Beauty out of the room. She escorted them down the spiral staircase, through the stables, and into the secret passage. The twins ran down through the tunnel as fast as they could, reaching the other ladder in half the time it took them to get there.

They quickly hurried through the trees, over the streams, and across the hills and finally reached the woods alongside the campsite as the sun began to rise. They turned back to the ghost of Old Queen Beauty.

"Thank you," Alex said. "You helped us so much."

The ghost silently nodded her head and then disappeared. They could tell she was just as grateful to them as they were to her.

The twins ran through the campsite and found Bob and Froggy sitting at the campfire outside the tent.

“That was the longest walk I’ve ever heard of!” Bob exclaimed when he saw them. “Where have you been?”

“We were worried sick!” Froggy said and leaped to his feet.

“We were in the Eastern Kingdom,” Conner panted. “We have so much to tell you guys!”

Alex looked around. “Where is everyone, anyway?” she asked.

Froggy and Bob looked to each other with sorrowful eyes. The twins instantly knew something bad must have happened while they were gone.

“What’s wrong?” Conner asked.

Froggy didn’t know how to explain. “Come have a look for yourselves,” he said.

He led the twins inside the tent. Inside the twins saw Jack kneeling sadly on the ground; Goldilocks was standing at his side, gently rubbing his back. Red sat next to Jack and cuddled Clawdius tightly in her arms.

“What happened?” Alex asked.

“It’s the harp,” Goldilocks said. “She’s gone.”

“What do you mean she’s gone?” Conner asked.

“She’s part of the Wand now,” Jack said. “We came into the tent and found it like *this*.”

Jack was clutching the Wand of Wonderment. It had a shiny new golden tint to it now—the exact shade of the harp.

Red used part of Goldilocks’s coat as a handkerchief to blow her nose. “Poor dear,” she said. “I suppose the singer has taken her final bow.”

“I never thought we would lose her completely to it,” Jack said, fighting back the emotion that suddenly rushed through him. “I wish we could have had more time to figure out a better way.”

Alex and Conner looked to each other and knew exactly what the other was thinking.

“Gloria,” Conner whispered to Alex. *“The harp’s name was Gloria.”*

Alex watched over her sad friends and took a step toward them, deciding now was the best time to tell them what they had learned from the spirits in Sleeping Beauty’s castle.

“The harp’s loss won’t be in vain,” she said. “We finally know what we need to defeat the Enchantress.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ROCK, ROOT, AND RAGE

The golden arches and pillars of the Fairy Palace could barely contain the anxieties growing inside them. The seven colorful fairies of the Fairy Council paced around the main hall away from their respected podiums, desperately trying to come up with an overdue solution to the crisis at hand.

“A whole territory has been destroyed!” Xanthous said. The flames on his head and shoulders were flickering wildly. “We need to find her!”

“Every corner of every kingdom has been searched twice, and there still is no trace of her,” said Emerelda.

“But what would we do if we found her?” Skylene asked. “We’re no match for the Enchantress.”

“Our magic is useless against hers,” Rosette added. “And she grows more powerful every day.”

“But we must do something—anything!” Xanthous demanded. “The world is counting on us!”

Tangerina had grown tired of his complaining; even her bees were irritated and flew around her beehive with their stingers out. “Then why don’t you think of something to do?” she said. “We’ve all been in here for days trying to come up with a practical solution—it’s not like we’re keeping anything from you.”

“If we can’t come up with a practical solution, then I suggest we come up with an *impractical solution,*” Xanthous halfheartedly suggested. “Let’s fight her at her own game. Who cares about honoring our fairy values?”

The flames on Xanthous’s shoulders flickered faster as he thought about it.

“The world has always looked to us to handle its troubles with peace and understanding. We cannot abandon those morals now—that’s what the Enchantress *wants,*” Emerelda said. “You can’t extinguish a fire by adding more flame. You of all people should know that, Xanthous.”

“Then if we can’t use our magic to stop her, let’s gather all the witches and warlocks from the Dwarf Forests and Pinocchio Prison and have *them* defeat her!” he proposed.

Emerelda massaged her forehead. “You want to set loose the witches and warlocks that *we* imprisoned?” she asked him.

Xanthous’s flames diminished and he slumped. She didn’t have to elaborate for him to realize how bad an idea this was.

“Any more bright ideas?” Tangerina asked him.

Xanthous turned to respond to her but had nothing to say. They were at a dead end.

“What if we can’t come up with an answer?” Coral asked in a tiny voice, cuddling her pet walking fish. “Will all of us perish if we can’t stop her?”

The situation had finally reached a point that forced them to consider the consequences of failing. Emerelda eyed her fellow fairies, angered by their sudden hopelessness.

“Shame on all of you,” Emerelda said and walked around the room. She stared directly into each of their eyes as she passed them. “We are the *Fairy Council*—if we lose our hope, all hope for the rest of the world is as good as gone. We cannot spend a moment humoring thoughts of failure. As long as someone remains standing with a noble heart there will *always* be a way for good to triumph over evil.”

The other fairies looked around at one another, inspired by Emerelda’s words. Moments like these were the reason why Emerelda was the head of the Fairy Council.

A small magenta flame abruptly appeared on the floor of the main hall. It came out of thin air and didn’t appear to be burning anything but the air around it. Emerelda gazed down at it and cautiously stepped away. “Brace yourselves,” she said, and her green eyes grew large. “We’re about to have company.”

With a giant blast, the purple flame rapidly grew into a roaring magenta fire that covered the majority of the room. The fairies screamed and shielded themselves from the blaze. A split second later, the flames vanished and the Enchantress appeared.

The fairies froze with fear. Ezmia always knew how to make an entrance.

“It’s good to be home!” Ezmia laughed and looked around the room at all the frightened faces of her old peers. “For people who thought I was dead, you never look happy to see me.”

Emerelda was the only fairy brave enough to address her. “Why have you come here, Ezmia?”

The Enchantress ignored the question. “Oh, look,” Ezmia said happily. She strutted to a forgotten golden chair that had been pushed to the side of the room. “It’s my old seat from when I was on the Fairy Council. Remember those days?”

“You’ve certainly shown your true colors since,” Emerelda said.

“You act as if you’re all so faultless,” Ezmia sneered. “I can see right through that pathetic façade of a perfect loving family. I know how spiteful you can be when no one is looking. I sat in this room for hours every day trying to make the world a better place just as much as the rest of you—but why did you target me with your cruelty? Why was *I* treated so poorly by the people who were supposed to be perfect?”

“Because you became vindictive,” Emerelda said.

“No,” Ezmia said and shook her head. “It was because I became *better*. I was more powerful, more gifted, and more liked than any of you could ever be. When the Fairy Godmother announced me as her heir, you acted as if I had done something horrible to you. She put me on a pedestal and you all isolated me there.”

“As your ability grew, so did your ego,” Emerelda said. “You thought you were above us—you even renounced your title as a fairy.”

“*You’re* the ones who renounced me long before I ever did,” Ezmia said and glared at her. “You ignored me, excluded me, and hated me from the minute I arrived. The world may be convinced you had nothing to do with my *change of career*, but I will always know the truth. You made it impossible for me to be anything but disdained.”

The Enchantress ran a finger on the arm of her old chair, remembering all the painful memories of her time as a fairy.

“The cruelest thing you can do to someone is force them to *hurt* alone—and you left me hurting on my own many times,” Ezmia said. “Every time I was heartbroken, I would go to the rest of you hoping to receive some compassion, but you let your jealousies get in the way of showing any sympathy. You actually enjoyed watching me suffer, relishing the fact that *something* was distressing me.”

Emerelda surprised the Enchantress and the other fairies with what she said next—*she didn’t deny it.*

“I admit that even we were guilty of being less than perfect at times,” Emerelda said. “But as we’ve grown from our mistakes, your mistakes have only grown.”

Ezmia snorted and slowly clapped in Emerelda’s direction. “Touché,” the Enchantress said. “You managed to admit you were wrong *and* scold me in one breath. You’re good at this leadership thing, Em. No wonder they replaced me with you.”

“I was not a replacement,” Emerelda said. “You were never what this council needed.”

“No, I was never what this council *wanted*,” Ezmia said sharply. “They chose you, Emerelda, because you were more *beautiful*, and the world always listens to a pretty face over an average one. And even though I changed my appearance and gained beauty over time, they still chose you over me because you were easier to control. You were the Fairy Godmother’s puppet I could never be.”

Emerelda returned her scornful stare. “I’d rather be a toy than a tyrant, Ezmia,” she said. “But I’m assuming you didn’t come here to reminisce, so what brings you to our kingdom?”

A small grin appeared on the Enchantress’s face. She was delighted to get a rise out of the fairy.

“The truth is, I’ve become rather bored waiting for you and the other rulers to gradually hand their kingdoms over to me,” Ezmia said, taking a seat on her old chair. “I’ve decided to invite them all to the new home I’m building for myself and get it all over with. I’m anxious for this whole thing to conclude as much as you all are.”

“None of us are going anywhere with you,” Xanthous said, and his flames rose.

A cunning smirk grew on the Enchantress’s face. “Oh yes, you are,” Ezmia said. “It’s not an option.”

The Enchantress snapped her fingers and the ground started to rumble with the power of a dozen earthquakes. All the fairies looked to one another, petrified of what was coming their way. Clusters of vines exploded out of the floor and seized the fairies in the room.

They desperately tried to free themselves—struggling against the plants with all their might and all their magic, but it was no use. The plants were too strong to escape. Ezmia roared with laughter as she watched the

vines coil around each Fairy Council member and drag them into the ground.

Emerelda sank her hands into the ground to prevent the vines from dragging her away. *"You won't win, Ezmia,"* she said.

"Oh, but I will," the Enchantress said, looking down at her with a smile in her eyes. "You see, I'm finally building my *own* pedestal. But this time, rather than admiration, I'm building it from rock, root, and *rage*."

Things were gloomy as ever at the Charming Palace. All the other rulers had gone home after the Happily Ever After Assembly meeting except for Sleeping Beauty, who had no choice but to stay. She sat with Cinderella in her chambers, quietly comforting the distraught mother.

"It's been almost two weeks since that horrible woman took my daughter away from me," Cinderella said. "I never thought I could feel like this inside. I never thought I could be so miserable."

Sleeping Beauty dabbed the tears spilling from her friend's tired eyes.

"You have to stay strong, Cinderella," Sleeping Beauty said. "We have to be brave for our people."

Cinderella blew her nose into a handkerchief. "But who is supposed to be brave for us at a time like this?" she asked. "When the rest of the world is looking to us for strength and guidance, who do we look up to for reassurance?"

Sleeping Beauty gently took Cinderella's hand in her own. "We have to inspire each other," she said.

Cinderella patted her friend's hand and placed her head on Sleeping Beauty's shoulder. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Cinderella said.

Sir Lampton stepped into the queen's chambers. His face was so long the queens knew he wasn't bearing good news.

"What is it, Sir Lampton?" Cinderella asked, bracing herself for whatever it was.

"More bad news, I'm afraid, Your Majesty," he said. "I just received a letter from Sir Grant in the Northern Kingdom. Apparently the Enchantress

attacked the Northern Kingdom last night after attacking Troll and Goblin Territory. They woke up this morning to discover all their crops have been poisoned."

"Dear God," Sleeping Beauty said and placed a hand on her chest. "Does the Enchantress have no soul?"

"Queen Snow White has asked that we send what we can," Lampton added.

"Yes, of course," Cinderella said. "Gather as much food as the kingdom can spare—"

The ground under the palace began to shake. Cinderella's chambers rattled as something moved through the palace toward her chambers.

"What on earth?" Lampton said, staring down at the floor as it began to crack under his feet. He retrieved his sword, although it was useless against what was coming.

Vines burst through the floor and slithered up to Queen Cinderella and Queen Sleeping Beauty. They wrapped around them and dragged them back from where they had come from. Sir Lampton tried rescuing the queens but it had all happened too quickly to prevent.

He looked through the cracks in the floor; he could see the vines dragging the screaming queens several floors through the palace and into the ground where they disappeared out of sight.

The ground began to rumble again, this time not from something directly below the palace but from something much farther in the distance. Lampton ran over the cracks to a window to see what was causing all the commotion.

Miles away, in the northern part of the Charming Kingdom, a gargantuan pillar made of rock, roots, and dirt emerged from the ground and rocketed into the air. The land cracked and elevated unevenly for miles and miles around it. The pillar grew higher and higher, only stopping once it had reached the clouds.

A massive coliseum was on the top of the pillar, constructed of enormous jagged stones shaped like arrowheads. Vines and thornbushes grew up the sides of the pillar, taking with them all the rulers they had seized from around the world.

The Enchantress sat in the center of the coliseum on her old Fairy Council chair like it was a throne. The plants arrived with her guests and

pinned them around to the walls at various heights and angles around her. The abducted kings, queens, and fairies were now prisoners in Ezmia’s vengeful, earthy web.

True to her word, the Enchantress had built herself a pedestal made of the deepest parts of the earth, powered by the deepest anger of her soul.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE ENCHANTRESS'S MOST PRIZED POSSESSION

The ground began to tremble and quake under the campsite.

"What's happening?!" Conner yelled.

"It's the Enchantress!" Alex screamed. "She's starting her final attack!"

As if tiny explosions were being set off around the camp, bouquets of devilish vines burst through the ground and slithered through the site. They knocked over tents and people as they moved—as if they were *searching* for something.

Jack and Goldilocks immediately drew their weapons and began slicing the demonic plants, but there were too many of them to fight off.

"Help!" The twins heard a high-pitched scream behind them. They turned around and saw the vines tangle around Red and attempt to drag her back into the ground with them. *"Someone help me!"*

Jack and Froggy both ran to her, throwing themselves on the ground and reaching a hand toward her. Red was almost all the way underground. … Only one of her hands was free. She looked to Jack and then to Froggy. If these were the last moments of her life, she had to decide right then and there who she wanted to spend them with.…

Red grabbed hold of Froggy's hand. He was shocked to see her hand land in his.

"You chose *me*…" Froggy said, looking into her eyes. Both of them recognized the significance of this moment.

"Yes, I *choose* you," Red said, and a small smile appeared on her face. She pulled him a little closer and kissed his slimy green lips, not repulsed by his appearance or texture whatsoever.

The vines climbed over Red and began wrapping around Froggy, too. Jack grabbed hold of one of his legs and Goldilocks grabbed the other. The vines were too strong for them to pull Froggy and Red free, but Jack and Goldilocks weren't giving up. The vines moved past Froggy and began growing around the whole group, pulling all four of them toward the ground.

Alex and Conner were on their way to help when they heard another cry.

"Butterboy!" Trollbella yelled from across the camp. The vines had wrapped around her and were dragging her into the ground, too.

Conner grunted and looked around. "Can someone else save Trollbella?" he called out, but all the other trolls and goblins were too afraid of the vines to go near her.

"Save me, Butterboy!" Trollbella cried.

"Okay, fine! I'm coming!" Conner yelled. He and Alex changed their course and ran for the young Troll Queen instead.

Conner grabbed Trollbella's hands and Alex grabbed Conner's feet. They tried to pull her free but the vines were too strong.

"This would be so romantic if it weren't for the possessed plants pulling us apart, Butterboy," Trollbella whispered dreamily into Conner's ear.

The vines began to creep past Trollbella and onto Conner, pulling him with her.

"Alex, you have to let go of me!" Conner yelled behind himself. "You can't let the vines get you."

"I'm not letting you go, Conner!" Alex yelled back.

"You have to save the fairy-tale world, Alex!" Conner said. "You have to save the Otherworld and Mom, too!"

Alex's grip around her brother's feet tightened. "I can't save anything without you," she said.

"Yes, you can," he said. "It was always meant to be you! You're the one who got us here and you're the one who is going to get us out! You heard the ghosts—you're the heir of magic! You've got to defeat the Enchantress so this world can go on!"

The vines had wrapped almost completely around Conner. Alex was shaking her head profusely.

"I can't do it alone!" she said, terrified to lose him.

"Yes, you can," Conner said. "I'm really sorry about this!"

Conner kicked Alex off of him and the vines consumed him entirely. They dragged him and Trollbella down into the ground and disappeared.

"Conner!" Alex yelled after him, but it was no use. He was gone.

Alex looked across the camp just in time to see the vines pull Red, Froggy, Jack, and Goldilocks into the ground with one final heave. As soon as Trollbella, Red, and the others clinging on to them had been taken, all the vines in the campsite disappeared into the ground. *They had come for the queens.*

Alex got to her feet and looked around in shock. In a matter of minutes, all of her friends and her brother had been taken from her. She had no choice but to finish their quest alone—*it was all up to her now.*

Bob ran up to Alex. “Where have they been taken?”

Alex was wondering the same thing. She looked down at the large cracks the vines had left in the ground. They weren’t just in the campsite, but stretched off into the distance, as if the vines had left marks on their way to and from their destination.

“I have to go,” Alex said. She ran to their tent and retrieved the Wand of Wonderment. She placed it in the troll’s satchel and threw it over her shoulder. Alex ran off into the distance, following the cracks in the ground as if they were a trail.

“Where are you going?” Bob asked as he ran after her, but she didn’t respond. *“Alex?!”* He tried chasing after her, but she was a third his age and ran three times as fast as him.

Alex never stopped running. Her feet hit the ground in rhythm with her racing heartbeat. She was fueled by adrenaline but mostly by fear. She could have sworn she heard Red’s screams and Conner’s shouts as they were dragged under the ground below her.

She prayed she would get to the Enchantress before she could harm her brother or the others, and wished with all her might that once she got there she would have a plan to take Ezmia’s most prized possession away from her.

Alex had to think of a way to steal Ezmia’s pride, not only for a moment, but for the rest of her life. What could she say or do to her that the Enchantress would take to heart and not brush off? How could Alex emotionally scar Ezmia so deeply that her pride would never return completely?

Could an evil enchantress take to heart anything that was done or said by a thirteen-year-old girl? Ezmia had spent a century imprisoning the souls

of kings, soldiers, and fairies in jars—was someone like Alex capable of leaving a mark on someone like that?

Then, like a flash of lightning, Alex realized something for the first time—what she thought of as a disadvantage was actually in her favor. It was *because* she was a thirteen-year-old that she had a greater chance of bruising the Enchantress's ego. If *Alex* could muster up enough courage to say something to the Enchantress that a king or fairy never had the bravery to before, perhaps it would have an even greater effect on her.

Alex had to choose her words wisely, though. She had to get straight to the point and straight to the punch; the Enchantress wouldn't be listening for very long.

It had to work, because Alex had run out of ideas and out of time. After following the cracks in the ground for hours, Alex found herself staring up in horror at the Enchantress's new home in the Charming Kingdom.

The vines dragged Queen Red and Queen Trollbella and the people who clutched on to them for miles and miles underground. They reached the Charming Kingdom and were pulled up the sides of a massive pillar of earth and into the menacing coliseum on top of it. The vines instantly pinned the newcomers to the walls.

Froggy was hung upside down next to Red. Jack and Goldilocks were pinned together, each with their weapon hand behind them. Conner scanned the coliseum and was sad to see they weren't alone.

Hung across the wall from top to bottom were Queen Snow White and King Chandler, Queen Cinderella and King Chance, Queen Sleeping Beauty and King Chase, Queen Rapunzel, and the members of the Fairy Council. And now, with the inclusion of Red and Trollbella, the entire Happily Ever After Assembly was at the Enchantress's mercy.

"Oh good, we're all here," Ezmia said upon Red and Trollbella's arrival.

The Enchantress sat imperially on her golden throne. Her hair and cape flowed around her more aggressively than ever. Rumpelstiltskin peeked out

from behind the throne, looking regretfully at all the confined monarchs around the room.

A large crater was indented in the floor, with a small magenta fire burning a pile of skulls like firewood in the center of it. Six glass turquoise jars were placed in a line in front of the Enchantress—Conner knew his grandmother was trapped inside one of them. And to Conner's horror, as he looked around the room, his grandmother wasn't the only member of his family being held prisoner in the coliseum.

Pinned to the wall across from him in a giant birdcage was Conner's mother. She cradled Princess Hope in her arms; the child's cries echoed through the coliseum. The toddler princess could see her mother tangled in the vines beside her and reached through the bars of the cage toward her.

"*Mama!*" Princess Hope cried.

"*It's all going to be all right, darling,*" Cinderella said, hoping it wasn't a lie.

Charlotte's jaw dropped and the little color in her face drained away as soon as she saw her son.

"*Conner?*" she mouthed, so thrilled yet so terrified to see him in such a horrible place.

"*Mom!*" he silently mouthed back.

"*Where's your sister?*" she asked.

Conner wasn't sure what the best answer was to give her. "Safe," he decided to say.

Ezmia stood at her throne. "Let's begin, shall we?" she said. The Enchantress gazed around the coliseum with her index finger pressed tightly to her lips, as if she was a little girl in a candy shop.

"Let's start with the Charming Kingdom," Ezmia said.

The vines began to rustle. The plants hoisted Cinderella and King Chance off of the walls and forced them both into a kneeling position on the ground in front of the crater.

"You soulless monster!" Cinderella yelled up at her.

"Let our daughter go!" King Chance demanded.

"If you want your daughter back, then renounce your throne and hand your kingdom over to me," Ezmia said to him, as if it were a simple decision.

"*You will never have my kingdom!*" King Chance yelled.

The Enchantress glared at him through her long lashes. “Fine,” she said. Ezmia snapped her fingers and her vines reached through the cage and pulled Princess Hope out of Charlotte’s arms. The child was screaming; tears and snot ran down her terrified face. The vines dangled the princess over the flames of the fire.

“No!” Cinderella screamed. *“Do it, Chance, just do it!”* she begged her husband.

King Chance looked to all the other kings and queens around the room, but no one pleaded with him otherwise. The world they had tried to protect with honor and integrity was long gone.

“Very well,” King Chance said. “I renounce my throne and my kingdom to you, Ezmia.”

As he spoke these words, the Enchantress threw back her head and her victorious laugh filled the coliseum. The flames in the crater grew higher and a trail of thick black smoke began to fill the sky.

“Now, was that so hard?” Ezmia asked with a large grin. She snapped her fingers again and the vines dropped Princess Hope into her mother’s arms. The family was only reunited for a moment before the vines jerked them back against the wall.

“Let’s move on to the Fairy Kingdom,” Ezmia said with a bright smile.

The vines brought the seven fairies off the wall and to the edge of the crater.

“You know what to say, Emerelda,” Ezmia said and leisurely inspected her nails. “Make it quick so we can finish this at a decent hour—or do you need further persuasion as well?”

The vines wrapped around the jar containing the Fairy Godmother’s soul and held it over the fire. All the fairies shouted for it to be released.

“If it makes your cruel wrath come to an end any sooner, *fine*. I hand over the Fairy Kingdom to you,” Emerelda said, against her will.

The flame in the crater grew even higher and the black smoke thickened. Ezmia closed her eyes and soaked up the moment for all it was worth. Her whole body tingled with triumph. She had waited centuries for this, and it was all finally happening.

One by one, the Enchantress called the monarchs before her and forced them to give up their kingdoms. Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, and Trollbella all renounced their thrones with teary eyes and heavy hearts.

And with each surrender, the magenta flames rose higher and higher and the smoke condensed.

“I just have one thing to say before you put me back on the wall,” Trollbella said, begrudgingly staring at Ezmia with intense eyes. “You stopped my dancing, and you will *never* be forgiven.”

The Enchantress, along with every other person in the coliseum, stared oddly at the small Troll Queen, not knowing what to make of her statement. Finally, there was only one ruler left to relinquish her throne.

“Last but certainly not least, I call Queen Red Riding Hood of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom to the floor.”

Red gave a small squeal at the sound of her name. The vines lifted her to the front of the crater. Froggy fought desperately against the vines hanging him as she was moved.

“Queen Red, do you willingly surrender your kingdom to me?” the Enchantress asked, as if she already counted on Red’s submission.

Red looked up at Froggy and at Jack and Goldilocks for strength. She knew that with her renunciation the Enchantress would have successfully conquered the world.

“Well,” Red peeped, “I’m not sure I’m in a position to do that.”

All trace of accomplishment vanished from Ezmia’s face. As if it weren’t already impossibly high, the tension in the coliseum grew.

“Excuse me?” Ezmia asked with a terrifying scowl.

Red went pale.

“It’s easy to explain,” Red said. Her hands trembled as she spoke. “Unlike everyone else here, I’m an *elected* queen. My kingdom doesn’t necessarily belong to me; it belongs to all the Hoodians.”

Conner, Jack, Froggy, and Goldilocks were beaming proudly at her. Even if Red had only bought them a minute, it was a minute not owned by the Enchantress.

Ezmia continued to gaze frighteningly at Red and contemplate her next move. “Very well,” she said. “I’ll just have every last person in your kingdom killed until you’re the only one left.”

“No!” Red yelled. *“I lied! I’m the only one with the true authority! It’s called the Red Riding Hood Kingdom, not the Hoodian Republic!”*

The evil smirk came back to the Enchantress’s face. “Then I suggest you proceed,” she demanded.

Red's eyes filled with tears; she'd never thought she would be robbed of her own most prized possession on the journey—her *kingdom*.

"I, Queen Red…" Red started, but her voice trailed off.

"Yes, get on with it," Ezmia ordered.

"I… I… I…" Red continued with difficulty. "I willingly hand over my kingdom to—"

"HEY, EZMIA!" said a voice behind Red. Everyone looked up to see Alex at the front of the coliseum. She was panting and sweaty; she had just *climbed* up the pillar.

"Alex!" Charlotte gasped.

The Enchantress was infuriated to be interrupted when Red was so close to finishing. "Who is *this*?!" she asked Rumpelstiltskin.

"I don't know," Rumpelstiltskin said. "I've never seen her before."

Alex made her way farther into the coliseum. She was out of breath and so tired from the climb she could barely stand.

"Little girl, if I were you I would turn back around and throw myself to the ground," Ezmia yelled. "Trust me, it'll be much less painful than what I'm about to do to—"

"I'M NOT AFRAID OF YOU!" Alex yelled.

The coliseum went dead silent; even the fire seemed to burn quieter.

"What did you say?" the Enchantress said blankly.

Alex knew the time had come to leave her mark, and she didn't have much time to leave it in. "I said I'm not afraid of you," she repeated. "I've dealt with girls like you my entire life—you want *everything* because *nothing* will make you happy! You're not an all-powerful and terrifying *enchantress*, Ezmia—you're just a *brat*! And no matter who you kill or what you conquer, people will always pity and laugh at you because of it!"

The entire coliseum held its breath. Ezmia maintained her stoic expression but everyone knew she was outraged beyond belief, because her hair flickered violently above her head and small flames burned straight out of her eyes.

The Enchantress left her throne and slowly strolled over to Alex. Alex reached into her satchel—she could feel the Wand of Wonderment activate itself in her hand. She had succeeded in taking Ezmia's pride.

"Well, I hope that little display was worth it," Ezmia said. "Because it's the last thing you'll ever do." The Enchantress pointed her finger at her,

and with a bright violet flash, Alex was blasted out of the coliseum and into the sky.

“ALLLEEEXXX!” Conner screamed from on the wall.

It happened so fast Alex wasn’t sure what had happened. The last thing she heard was her brother’s scream; the last thing she saw was a bright flash and then the coliseum suddenly becoming smaller and smaller as she soared farther and farther into the air.

Everything around her—her sight, her sound, and all her other senses—went black. It was as if Alex had fallen into a very, very deep sleep.…

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE DREAM

Alex slowly opened her eyes one at a time. She was lying on the ground facing a dark ceiling. She didn't know where she was and didn't remember how she had gotten there, but got to her feet to look around.

Alex was standing in a dark cave. A lantern was on the ground beside her. She picked it up and journeyed deeper into the cave. There was something about this place that Alex found very comforting. Despite its darkness and mystery, for whatever reason she knew she was safe.

Up ahead she saw a light. She continued toward the light and two large boulders came into view. Two little girls were standing on top of the boulders and two were standing beside them. As she got closer, she was able to make out what they were wearing.

The first little girl wore a sweater, a skirt, and a headband, just like Alex. The second little girl wore a long nightgown and no shoes. The third little girl wore a puffy dress with an apron over it. The fourth little girl had braided pigtails and wore silver shoes.

All four of the girls stared blankly at Alex, as if they were waiting for her to say something.

"Who are you?" Alex asked the girls with a smile.

"You know who we are," the little girl in the nightgown said.

Alex raised the lantern higher and took a second look at them. "I do?" she asked. "How do we know each other?"

"You know us, but we don't know you," said the girl in the silver shoes. She spoke with an adorable twang in her voice.

"I'm afraid I don't," Alex said.

"You'll figure it out if you think about it long enough," said the girl in the sweater in a charming British accent.

"You all look very familiar," Alex admitted. "It's as if I've met you before or seen you in a movie or read about you…" Alex gasped. "Wait a second—*are you who I think you are*?"

The girls shared the same amused smile.

"Hello, I'm Lucy Pevensie," said the girl in the sweater and curtsied.

"I'm Alice," said the girl in the apron.

“I’m Dorothy Gale,” said the girl with braids.

“And I’m Wendy Darling, darling,” the one in the nightgown said.

Alex couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “But you’re the girls I grew up reading about,” she said. “I used to pretend I was you when I was little. All I ever wanted was to be one of you and escape into my own magical world.…”

“Sounds like you got what you wanted,” Alice said.

Alex lowered her head and looked at the floor. Alice was right, but it was impossible for Alex to be happy about it anymore.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Wendy asked.

Alex sighed. “I used to think of the Land of Stories as a paradise; it was my own personal safe haven,” she told them. “But now an evil enchantress has taken over all the kingdoms.”

“Oh my,” said Lucy. “Sounds like the White Witch!”

“Worse,” Alex said, and put it into terms they could understand. “She’s got the White Witch’s greed, the Wicked Witch of the West’s anger, the Queen of Hearts’ temper, and Captain Hook’s vengeance.”

All the girls shook their heads and showed their sympathy.

“That’s horrible,” Wendy said.

“Greed, and anger, and temper, oh my!” Dorothy said. “Can you melt her?”

“I wish,” Alex said with a laugh.

“Can Aslan prance on her?” Lucy asked.

“No, unfortunately,” Alex said.

“Can you feed her to a crocodile?” Wendy asked.

“I don’t think so,” Alex said.

“But then how are you going to defeat her?” Alice asked.

“My friends and I are building a powerful wand,” Alex said. She excitedly reached for the satchel to show them, but it wasn’t around her shoulder. “Oh no, where’s my wand? I just had it a second ago.”

She moved the lantern around, scanning the ground of the cave looking for a place she may have dropped it. The other girls giggled at her attempts. Alex looked up at them and slowly realized why they found her efforts so amusing.

“Is this a dream or am I dead?” she asked.

“Of course it’s a dream,” Lucy said.

“Why else do you think we’re here?” Alice asked.

“I hope a big cave isn’t what you think heaven looks like,” Dorothy said.

Alex was happy to hear it. “The last thing I remember was being blasted into the sky,” she said. “But how did I survive the fall?”

“Did your wand save you?” Lucy asked.

“Of course!” Alex exclaimed. “The Wand makes whoever is holding it invincible! It was in my hand the entire time! The Enchantress didn’t kill me after all!”

The girls cheered, but then Dorothy went silent.

“Are you going to *kill* the Enchantress with the Wand now?” Dorothy asked.

Alex hadn’t really thought about that. She had been so concerned with getting the Wand finished, she had never thought about what she would do *after* the Wand was made. How was she going to go about defeating the Enchantress with the Wand? Was she going to have to kill her with it? Was Alex even capable of killing someone? She always figured Jack or Goldilocks would do it if that was what was needed.

“I suppose I don’t have a choice,” Alex said.

“I’d recommend finding another way if there is one,” Dorothy said with a sad look on her face. “Even though melting the witch was an accident, I’ve felt awful about it ever since.”

What Dorothy said resonated with Alex more than she was letting on. She didn’t want to hurt anyone—but how could she stop Ezmia without killing her? Would Ezmia just find another way to cheat death like she had after Evly poisoned her?

“I don’t have to necessarily *kill* Ezmia,” Alex said, thinking out loud. “I just have to take away her *powers*… and her powers come from a place of *hate* and *anger*… so if I took away the reasons that validated her right to be *angry*… she would be *powerless*!”

Alex excitedly jumped up and down, pleased to have come up with an alternative way. The girls clapped for her.

“Violence is never the answer,” Wendy said. “I always try to tell John and Michael that when they play in the nursery, but they never listen to me.”

“When you figure out how to take away her hate and anger, would you let me know?” Alice asked. “I’d like to know in case I run into the Queen of Hearts again.”

Alex went silent as the wheels in her head were turning. “I think I know how to do it,” she said and her eyes darted back and forth from one side to the other. “And I may not even need the Wand to do it after all…”

“So you just finished a huge journey only to find out what you needed was with you all along?” Dorothy asked. “*Been there.*”

Alex thought about it. The Wand might not have been the *solution*, but it was still useful; it still had saved her life. It had also given them *hope*, and without that they would have been lost for sure.

She looked up at the girls and around the cave. “Now I understand the meaning of this dream,” she said. “Deep down I knew I could never kill the Enchantress, so I was searching for another way. The cave represents my questioning and you represent the answer—because ever since I was a little girl I’ve always thought about you when I had a problem.”

“Why is that?” Alice asked her.

“I suppose I’ve learned so much from you,” Alex said. “I always wanted to be as loving as Wendy, or as curious as Alice, or as brave as Lucy, or as adventurous as Dorothy—I always saw a little bit of myself when I read about each of you.”

All the girls smiled at her. “We’re happy we could help,” Lucy said.

“And we’ll always be here if you need us,” Wendy said.

Alex nodded thankfully to them.

“Is there anything else on your mind we could help you with?” Dorothy asked. “Since we happen to be lingering in your subconscious?”

“Actually, now that you mention it, there is something I’ve always wanted to ask you if I ever got the chance,” Alex said. She didn’t know what had caused her to believe she would ever have the chance to ask literary characters a question, but she asked them nonetheless. “After seeing amazing magical places like Neverland, Oz, Narnia, and Wonderland, why did you ever want to leave?”

The girls looked to one another; they had never been asked the question before, at least in Alex’s mind.

“Because no matter where you go or what you see, you’ll always want to be where you belong,” Lucy said.

“Your home is where you feel most comfortable and loved,” Wendy said.

“It’s a part of you,” Alice added. “It’s where your family is.”

“There’s no place like home,” Dorothy said, as if it was the first time she’d ever said those words.

Alex appreciated what they had to say, but wasn’t sure if she entirely agreed. “I wonder, though, if *home* sometimes isn’t where you’re *from*,” she said.

The girls looked at her as if she had already answered her own question. Alex wondered if *that* had been the real question lingering in her mind all along.

“Alex? Alex?” said a familiar voice. Alex looked all around the cave but couldn’t tell where it was coming from.

“What’s happening?” Alex asked the girls, but they had disappeared.

“Alex! Are you hurt? Please wake up!” the voice pleaded, and the more it did, the more the cave around her disappeared.

Alex awoke on the ground; this time she was outside. She saw the sky and the tops of trees above her, as well as the face of a concerned and balding man looking down at her.

“Bob?” Alex asked and sat up.

“You’re alive!” Bob said with teary eyes and hugged her. *“It’s a miracle! I just saw you fall from the sky!* You might be in shock—let me check your heart!”

Bob grabbed hold of Alex’s wrist and checked her pulse. “I wonder if there’s an intensive care unit somewhere in this kingdom,” he said.

“Bob, I’m fine—*look*,” Alex said. Her hand was still clutching the Wand. “It’s the Wand of Wonderment! I was holding on to it and it saved me!”

Bob looked at her like she was speaking a different language. “Is it wrong that I’m still surprised by all of this?”

Alex jumped to her feet. She could see the Enchantress’s pillar in the distance. The sky above it was filling more and more with the black smoke from the fire.

“I’ve got to get back there,” Alex said.

“*Back* there?” Bob asked in amazement. “Wait—are you telling me that’s where you fell from?”

“Yes, and now I have to get back,” Alex said. “I just don’t have time to go by foot.”

“Then how are you supposed to get there?” Bob said.

Alex looked down at the Wand and then back to him. “I think I have an idea,” she said, and a sly smile appeared on her face.

Bob backed away from her. “I don’t like the turn this conversation has suddenly taken,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE GREATEST MAGIC OF ALL

The Enchantress frantically paced back and forth in front of her throne. Her hair anxiously swayed above her. *"Say it again!"* she demanded.

"But I've already said it ten times," Red said, still kneeling before the fire.

"You will say it *one hundred times* if that's what I ask of you!" Ezmia yelled.

Red did what she was told. "I, Queen Red of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom, give my kingdom to you," she said.

Ezmia looked at the fire and waited for a change, but it remained the same—just as high and just as strong. The Enchantress slammed her hands on the arms of her chair.

"What's wrong, Ezmia?" Rumpelstiltskin asked.

"It's not working!" she screamed. "I don't understand. I've been working on this for centuries! I had *everything* I needed."

Charlotte was sobbing hysterically in the birdcage. *"You horrible… horrible… horrible creature,"* she cried. *"How could you do that to a girl?"*

"I told you to shut up, woman!" Ezmia yelled at her. She could barely think.

Charlotte continued her sobs, mourning louder in spite of Ezmia's screaming. As far as Charlotte knew, her daughter was dead and she was never coming back. Conner had been in shock since it had happened. But as he watched the Enchantress struggle, his spirits started to rise.

Ezmia needed all seven of the deadly sins and the heir of magic to activate the portal. Maybe his sister had successfully taken her pride—maybe she had finished the Wand and was alive!

"That dreadful witch Hagatha must have lied to me!" Ezmia yelled. "The fire should have grown into a portal into the Otherworld as soon as I conquered the past, present, and future, and mastered the seven deadly sins—lust, envy, sloth, greed, gluttony, wrath… and *pride*."

A strange look came to the Enchantress's face as she thought on the spell's ingredients. She looked to the spot where Alex had been standing

when she was blasted into the sky. To everyone's surprise, a giant smile suddenly appeared on Conner's face.

"What's the matter, Ezmia?" Conner said. "Did a little girl take away your *pride*?"

The Enchantress jerked her head toward him like a hawk finding its prey. "What did you just say?" Ezmia said sharply.

"Conner, what are you doing?" Froggy whispered to him.

"Don't make her angrier!" Jack said.

Conner ignored them. "I said, a *little girl* took away *Ezmia the Enchantress's* pride!" he called out so everyone in the coliseum could hear him. "That's why you can't complete your spell!"

A whispered murmur spread through the coliseum between the kings and queens. Was Conner just taunting her or was there truth to what he said?

"Silence!" Ezmia ordered them. "If you think my pride could be taken from me you're all insulting your own intelligence! Bring the boy to me!"

The vines lifted Red back against the wall and placed Conner in front of the fire.

"No!" Charlotte yelled. *"Don't you dare hurt him!"*

"Butterboy!" Trollbella yelled.

Conner wasn't afraid. "Are you going to kill me, too?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, I am," the Enchantress said.

"Oh, good one!" Conner said spitefully. "Way to make yourself feel better, Ezmia! Killing another innocent child really shows how *prideful* you are! What are you going to do next—club a couple baby seals?"

The Enchantress had had enough of him. "Any *final* words?" she said.

Conner had to think about it, wanting to make whatever he said count. "You're ugly and you smell bad," he said. "And where I come from, everyone thinks you're green with horns!"

Ezmia raised her hand in his direction. Conner braced himself.

"Ezmia! Look!" Rumpelstiltskin yelled and pointed to the sky.

Flying toward the coliseum was a large white horse with massive wings. As it flew closer everyone in the coliseum gasped when they saw who was steering it.

"Alex!" Conner screamed.

"You're alive!" Charlotte screamed from the cage.

The horse landed in the center of the coliseum and Alex jumped off its back. She commandingly raised the Wand of Wonderment and pointed it at the Enchantress.

“Miss me?” Alex said.

The Enchantress couldn’t believe what she was seeing—as if her day could get any worse. She waved her hands and the vines dragged Conner back against the wall.

“Alex, don’t waste any time!” Conner yelled as he was dragged off. *“Just zap her! Strike her dead—”* Ezmia waved her hand again and the vines covered Conner’s mouth.

The Enchantress glanced sideways at Charlotte in the cage and it all suddenly dawned on her—she wasn’t the Fairy Godmother’s granddaughter after all. Ezmia slowly strode over to Alex, looking her up and down like she was an interesting piece of art.

“So, you’re the Fairy Godmother’s real granddaughter, I take it?” Ezmia said, and began circling her. Alex never lowered the Wand; she was ready to strike if Ezmia showed any sign of doing the same.

“It’s interesting that we have so much in common,” Ezmia said. “We’re both from the same place, we both have magic in our blood, and we both possess extraordinary ability.…”

“We’re nothing alike,” Alex snapped. “I could never do all the horrible things you’ve done.”

A smile appeared on Ezmia’s face. “That’s where you’re wrong,” she said. “You see, I came into this world just like I’m assuming you did—full of excitement and promise. I wanted to do so much good work, help so many people, and give as much as I could to those who needed me. But then I learned a very harsh lesson—*the world doesn’t always give back.*

“I am not a tragic case of the world; I *am* the world—cruel, unfair, and *not a fairy tale*. People are not born heroes or villains; they’re created by the people around them. And one day when your bright-eyed and bushy-tailed view of life gets its first taste of reality, when bitterness and anger first run through your veins, you’ll discover that you are *just like me*—and it’ll scare you to death.”

Alex shook her head and gripped the Wand even tighter. “No, Ezmia, I’ll never be like you,” she said. “Because I would rather have nothing and a big heart than everything and no heart at all.”

Everything went quiet in the coliseum. Ezmia's hair was flowing above her, out of control.

"Oh, snap!" Conner yelled. *"You need some ointment for that burn, Ezmia?"*

Ezmia waved her hand and the vines covered Conner's mouth again.

"You're brave with that Wand in your hand," Ezmia said to Alex. "But I'd like to see you cross me with it out of reach."

Alex knew this was her moment—if she wanted to defeat the Enchantress for good, this might be her only chance.

"Fine," Alex said, and tossed the Wand to the ground. "I don't need it."

The entire coliseum gasped.

"Alex, are you crazy?!" Conner yelled through the vines covering his mouth. *"Pick it back up! Pick it back up!"*

The Enchantress roared with laughter at Alex's carelessness. "You stupid girl!" she said. "You must have a death wish!"

"I don't need a wand to defeat you, Ezmia," Alex said. "Whether I have magic in my blood or not, I'll always have the most powerful magic of all inside me—*compassion*. And I have enough inside of me even for you."

"What?" the Enchantress said, amused by her foolishness.

Alex took a deep breath, praying what she was about to say would strip Ezmia of her powers forever.

"Ezmia, on behalf of everyone in this room, I *apologize* for what the world put you through, and I *forgive* you for all the havoc you caused trying to heal," Alex said. "I'm sorry your family was killed when you were a little girl. I'm sorry no one was there to comfort you when you had your heart broken over and over again. I'm sorry the fairies never showed you the kindness they showed everyone else. And I'm sorry you felt *revenge* was the only way you could piece yourself together again."

Everyone was looking back and forth between Alex and Ezmia like they were at a tennis match. Conner covered his eyes, afraid he was about to watch his sister be killed for real this time.

The Enchantress was taken aback by what Alex had to say—it had been the last thing she expected to come out of the girl's mouth. Ezmia didn't know what to do but laugh. She threw her head back a number of times and let a malicious laugh erupt and grow from inside of her.

“Apology not accepted,” Ezmia said. She pointed her finger at Alex to blast her into the heavens again—but nothing happened. She pointed her finger again—still, nothing was happening. Ezmia tried with her other hand but only got the same result.

Ezmia’s hair gradually lost its magenta color and faded to gray, falling in her face one strand at a time. The fire in the crater diminished more and more by the second, until there was nothing left but skulls. The vines around the coliseum squirmed like dying snakes, loosening their grip and releasing the people they held against the wall.

“No!” Ezmia screamed. *“No—this is impossible!”*

The room watched in astonishment as magic slowly left the Enchantress’s body and Ezmia faded into an elderly and decrepit woman, too weak to stand on her own feet. *The Enchantress had lost her power.*

Alex closed her eyes and, possibly for the first time all day, exhaled. She turned back to her brother as he brushed the limp vines off his body. He, along with everyone else in the coliseum, stared at her with enough pride to knock off the ceiling had there been one. A thirteen-year-old girl in a headband had been able to do what none of the crowned monarchs could.

As Ezmia withered away, she fell to the floor and crawled on her hands and knees. A small cackle came from her as she grabbed hold of the Wand of Wonderment left on the floor.

“Alex, behind you!” Conner screamed.

Alex turned to see Ezmia pointing the Wand directly at her. As she held the Wand, her body and her magic were restored. Her hair flowed above her head, the fire in the crater ignited again, and the vines began to vibrate with life and started dragging people back onto the walls.

Without time to think, Conner grabbed hold of Goldilocks’s sword and ran toward his sister, slicing the vines as they tried seizing him.

Ezmia glared at Alex with an evil smile on her face and in her eyes. “Maybe I was wrong,” the Enchantress said. “Maybe I will have my own happily-ever-after, after all!”

Alex froze where she stood, petrified to her core. She couldn’t believe how quickly the situation had changed—in a matter of seconds she had gone from victory to defeat. A bright blast shot out of the Wand and toward her. Alex closed her eyes, knowing it was the end—*this was how she was going to die.*

“Nooo!” Rumpelstiltskin yelled. He came out of nowhere and jumped in front of Alex. The blast hit him in the chest and he fell to the ground.

Ezmia watched in shock as the fatal blast meant for Alex had hit the only person she had ever considered a friend. Conner arrived at the Enchantress’s side and sliced the Wand of Wonderment in half. The Wand was destroyed; the magic drained from Ezmia’s body and the enchantments around the coliseum faded once again.

Alex went to the floor and held Rumpelstiltskin’s head up in her lap. Conner dropped down next to her, but there was nothing either of them could do.

“You saved my life!” Alex said to the little man in her arms. *“Why would you do that for me?”*

Rumpelstiltskin was gasping and his eyes grew heavier by the second. “I just wanted my brothers to have something to be proud of,” he grunted weakly. He smiled up at the twins, closed his eyes for the last time, and died in Alex’s arms.

“Oh no,” Conner said. “Poor little guy.”

A heavy wheezing came from nearby. The twins looked across the floor to see Ezmia crawling toward them. Her body was decaying and wilting at a speedy rate.

“Looks like you’ve won,” Ezmia wheezed with difficulty.

Alex and Conner looked at each other, disgusted. Even as they held the body of her only acquaintance, all Ezmia cared about was her legacy. They looked down at her with the most pitying eyes she had ever been viewed with.

“No, Ezmia,” Alex said. “No one wins when there is loss.”

Ezmia rolled onto her back and stared up at the smoky sky. With one last rattling breath, her body rotted away until there was nothing left of her but the memory of what she had been. With nothing to validate the anger that powered her livelihood, the Enchantress’s body and soul disappeared—a casualty to compassion.

The kings and queens and fairies brushed the vines off their bodies again and happily embraced one another. The nightmare was over and their kingdoms were safe once again.

King Chance and Cinderella held Princess Hope, and Cinderella wiped away tears of joy from her exhausted eyes. Sleeping Beauty wouldn’t let go

of King Chase; it was the first time in weeks that they had seen each other. Snow White and King Chandler helped Rapunzel brush all the leaves out of her hair, which was a several-person effort.

Red kissed Froggy repeatedly all over his big frog head. Jack tried dipping Goldilocks for a romantic kiss, but her fugitive reflexes caused her to flip him over her shoulder by accident.

Trollbella walked over to Conner.

“Hey, listen, Trollbella, I’m very flattered but I’m not really interested in—” he started, but the Troll Queen silenced him again with an index finger pressed to his mouth.

“No, Butterboy, let me do all the talking,” she said. “I understand this day has been hard on you—watching the Squishygirl almost die and then narrowly escaping death yourself. I just wanted to let you know I’m in no rush for our wedding; whether it’s in two days or two weeks, I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Thanks?” Conner said. Trollbella winked at him and walked away, leaving him even more confused than before.

The Fairy Council went to the glass jars in front of the golden chair and one by one opened the lids and released the souls trapped inside. The twins watched as the souls of the Baker, the Locksmith, and the Soldier happily flew from the jars and disappeared into the sky above—free at last. The spirits of the King and the Musician hovered in the air behind the others, though, waiting to join the other spirits.

The ghosts of Old Queen Beauty and Gloria floated into the coliseum and up to their long-lost loves. They flew around, over, under, and through each other, finally reunited after centuries.

Gloria and the Musician looked to the twins and bowed thankfully to them before disappearing into the sky with the other spirits. The ghost of the King and Old Queen Beauty looked lovingly down and waved at Sleeping Beauty and King Chase before disappearing as well.

“Who was that?” Sleeping Beauty asked her husband.

King Chase looked up to the sky and smiled. “Well, I suppose they’re our guardian angels now.”

Jack chopped through the lock on Charlotte’s cage and she ran to her children, throwing her arms around them.

“Mom!” the twins said in unison.

“I have never been so proud of you in my life,” she tearfully exclaimed.

“That makes two of us,” said a voice behind them.

The twins turned to see their grandmother. She had just been released from the jar and was back to being her old solid self. The twins got to their feet and gave their grandmother an enormous hug, feeling so grateful they finally could.

Grandma leaned over and looked proudly into Alex’s and Conner’s eyes. “You two amaze me more and more as you get older,” she said lovingly to them. “Your father would be so proud of you.”

Alex and Conner smiled at each other, knowing that, wherever he was, he was smiling down at them, too.

The winged horse neighed loudly from the side of the coliseum.

“Hey, Alex, where did you find a flying horse?” Conner asked.

Alex’s happy grin suddenly faded. “Oh no, I forgot about Bob!” she yelled. “Grandma, can you change him back for me?”

The Fairy Godmother laughed. She retrieved her crystal wand from inside her robes and waved it in the horse’s direction. A bright beam of light traveled from the tip of her wand and spun around the horse until he was regular Dr. Bob again.

He shook his head and found his balance, dizzy from the transformation.

“Bob, is that you?” Charlotte gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t let you have *all* the fun, could I?” He laughed. Charlotte ran to his side and kissed him—the twins had to look away.

“You won’t believe what he went through,” Conner told his mom. “He was almost eaten by bears and sharks and he was captured by the Sea Witch and—”

“*And* we’ll let *him* tell you all about it,” Alex said while dragging her brother away. She figured it was best to give them some privacy.

The twins and their grandmother walked to the edge of the coliseum and looked out over the Charming Kingdom. The sun began to set, painting the sky a beautiful rosy shade.

“I’m sorry we ran away from the house, Grandma,” Alex said, trying to sound genuine but also trying to hide a smile at the same time.

“Yeah,” Conner laughed. “I feel *so bad* about that.” He didn’t even try to be sincere.

Their grandmother shook her head and looked to the sky, fighting a smile of her own. “What am I going to do with you two?” she said. “Magic lessons, I think, would do you some good; that way you won’t sink any more houses.”

“I totally forgot about that!” Conner said. “Sorry we sank your cottage, Grandma!”

“Magic lessons?! Really?” Alex asked with large eyes as she hopped up and down.

“I think you’ve earned it,” their grandmother said. “As long as your mother is fine with it.”

“After all this I don’t think she’ll ever be able to tell us no again,” Conner said.

“What was that, Conner?” Charlotte asked as she and Bob joined them at the edge of the coliseum.

“Oh, um…” Conner said and turned bright red. “I was just saying you may have difficulty telling us no from now on because we saved your life.”

Charlotte squinted at him. “I *gave* you life,” she said. “You’re never going to top that.”

Conner tried laughing it off. “I was just kidding,” he said, although there was obviously an element of truth to it.

The reunited family of five looked out over the land around them. As the sun set in the East, it also set on the reign of the Enchantress, and the twins could feel the Land of Stories sigh with relief. It was a paradise once more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

FOR BETTER, OR FOR WORSE

All the kings and queens left the Charming Kingdom the following day to celebrate the news of the Enchantress's defeat with their people. Red was the only one who stayed behind, because at the end of the week she, Froggy, Goldilocks, Jack, Bob, Charlotte, and the twins all attended Rumpelstiltskin's funeral.

Hearing the news of his final act and what his last words had been was hard for the Seven Dwarfs to swallow, so they wanted to make sure the ceremony was everything Rumpelstiltskin would have wanted.

It was a small ceremony in the Dwarf Forests on the front lawn of the Seven Dwarfs' cottage. The dwarfs had made their brother a casket of glass and jewels from their mines, just as they had for Snow White. He was buried in a daisy-covered field not too far from the cottage. The dwarfs said Rumpelstiltskin had spent a lot of time there when he was younger and they knew he would have been happy to make it his final place of rest. His tombstone even read:

HERE LIES
RUMPELSTILTSKIN

THE EIGHTH BROTHER

OF A PROUD DWARF FAMILY

That night, when they arrived back at the Charming Kingdom, King Chance and Queen Cinderella hosted a dinner to honor the twins and the others who had sailed on the *Granny*. Conner was seated at the table in the dining hall when a man sat next to him and started up a conversation.

"I'm looking forward to this," the man said. "I miss being a part of the famous Charming dinner parties."

"Do I know you?" Conner asked him and gave the man the side-eye.

"Conner, it's me," the man said. "It's *Froggy*."

Conner shook his head and looked at the man again. He always forgot Froggy was actually human, but no matter what physical form he took, he

always had the same kind eyes.

“Your grandmother changed me back as soon as we returned from the funeral,” Froggy said. “The funny thing is, I had grown so accustomed to being a frog, I had forgotten she still had to change me back.”

“Do you miss anything about being a frog?” Conner asked him.

“I do miss reaching the books on the top shelf without a ladder,” he said. “One doesn’t realize how useful frog legs can be until they lose them.” A twinkle came to Froggy’s eye. “Speaking of reading, I have something for you.”

He reached into his lapel and pulled out a rolled-up stack of parchments.

“When we were setting up the camps for the trolls, I found these in the *Granny*’s wreckage,” Froggy said and handed the parchments over to Conner.

“My stories!” Conner said. “I thought these were lost forever!”

“I must admit, I enjoyed them quite a bit,” Froggy said. “You’ve got a real knack for storytelling. Although, I do have a few words of advice for you.”

“What’s that?” Conner asked.

“Never let Red read these,” Froggy said. “I thought it was very clever, writing everyone as trolls, but she would have you executed if she read your interpretation of her.”

Conner chuckled and playfully punched Froggy’s shoulder.

“No, I’m serious,” Froggy said. Conner gulped.

The others finally arrived and took seats around the table. Jack and Goldilocks looked down timidly at all the silverware, not knowing what to start with. Red entered the room and almost blinded everyone with the amount of jewelry she was wearing. Even for a formal dinner in the Charming Palace, Red was overdressed.

Bob sat down across from Conner, looking unusually tense.

“What’s wrong, Bob?” Conner said. “You look like you’re about to operate on the president.”

Alex cleared her throat to get Conner’s attention.

“He’s going to propose to Mom tonight,” Alex mouthed when her mother wasn’t looking.

“Oh,” Conner mouthed back excitedly to Bob and his sister. He gave Bob an unsubtle wink and a thumbs-up.

“Is everything all right, Conner?” Charlotte asked.

“Um… *yes*,” Conner said. “I’m just really looking forward to the appetizers.”

Alex rolled her eyes at him. Charlotte studied her son suspiciously, afraid he was coming down with a cold.

A footman presented a tray to Goldilocks with an envelope addressed to her on it.

“A letter has come for you, madam,” the footman said.

“For *me*?” Goldilocks said. “I wonder what it could be.” She opened the envelope and read the note inside. An amused but shocked grin came to her face—she wasn’t sure how to feel about the news she received.

“What is it?” Jack asked her.

“It’s a note from the Red Riding Hood Castle stables,” Goldilocks said. “Porridge is *pregnant*.”

Jack and the twins couldn’t contain themselves. Each one laughed harder than the next. *“Buckle!”* the twins said together.

“I knew there was something going on between them!” Conner said.

The dinner began and the room was served course after course of the best food the twins had ever eaten. Just before the desserts were brought out, Bob tapped the side of his glass with a spoon and got the room’s attention. Alex and Conner shot excited looks at each other—*this was it.*

“I just wanted to thank you all so much for having me tonight,” Bob said. “I’m fairly new to the Bailey clan, so learning about all of you and coming into this world has been, well, the adventure of my life. And seeing that I happened to be in a room filled with people who make up the greatest love stories ever told, I would like to take this moment for all it’s worth.”

Charlotte looked back and forth between the twins, seeing if they knew what Bob was up to. They purposefully avoided her eyes, wanting Bob to surprise her fully. He got down on one knee and presented the ring to her.

“Charlotte, will you make me the happiest man in the world—*both worlds*—and be my wife?” Bob said.

Tears instantly filled Charlotte’s surprised eyes. “I… I… I…” she said. Everyone in the dining hall was on the edge of their seat. *“Yes, I would love nothing more!”*

Bob put the ring on Charlotte's finger and hugged her. Alex began to cry, which made Conner's eyes start to water, which ultimately caused everyone else in the room to well up, too. It was a picturesque moment, even by fairy-tale standards.

"You should get married in the palace," Cinderella said from the end of the table.

"What?" Charlotte asked, not believing her ears.

"Please, we insist," Cinderella said and took King Chance's hand in hers. "We've been trying to think of a way to thank you for taking care of Hope when you were being held by the Enchantress. It would be our pleasure."

Charlotte didn't know what to say. She was stunned by the offer. "That is so kind, but I'm not sure I could ever—"

"Mom," Alex interrupted her. "Speaking on behalf of every woman who has ever lived in the Otherworld, you *cannot* turn down the offer to have an actual fairy-tale wedding!"

"I have to agree, it would be pretty cool," Conner said.

Charlotte shrugged; the decision was basically made for her. "Well, all right, then. I would be honored, thank you!" she said. "We have to get back to our jobs in the Otherworld, but I suppose we can have a quick wedding with our friends here and then another one for our friends back home."

Everyone raised their glasses to toast Charlotte and Bob.

"May you live Happily Ever After," the Fairy Godmother said.

Red tapped her glass and stood at her seat. No one could look directly at her because of the light reflecting off her diamonds.

"I would like to add to the celebration with some wonderful news of my own," she said. "After speaking with the fairies and all the other queens and kings, I would like to announce that the Happily Ever After Assembly has decided to pardon Jack and Goldilocks for all their crimes and waive all warrants for their arrest as a thank-you for their daring and valiant efforts in defeating the Enchantress."

The room burst into applause and congratulations for the couple. However, Jack and Goldilocks looked the least excited out of all of them.

"Wonderful," Goldilocks said through a pained smile.

"Cheers," Jack said, reluctantly raising his glass to the others toasting them.

“You can move back into your old house, Jack,” Red said. “Which is going to be really convenient, because I’ve decided to build my country home right beside it!”

Jack and Goldilocks did their best to look as if this was good news and it excited them. Red went on and on about all the wonderful double dates they could have with her and Froggy and all the activities they could do now that they were going to be neighbors.

Goldilocks leaned toward Jack. “Well, at least I won’t have to feel guilty about making you live the life of an outlaw anymore,” she said.

“No more running from soldiers, or close encounters with ogres, or sneaking into shops to steal food, or sleeping under the stars in dangerous forests,” Jack said.

“It’s… *tempting* to live a quieter life,” Goldilocks said halfheartedly. “Just imagine us living the rest of our days in your manor, watching the grass grow with Red and Charlie.”

Jack and Goldilocks smirked at each other, both thinking the same thing. They couldn’t imagine a *worse* fate.

Goldilocks whispered something into Jack’s ear, and a big grin appeared on his face. The twins looked to each other, knowing something was up. Goldilocks stood from the table and walked over to Red. She endearingly wrapped her arms around her old nemesis and gave her a big hug.

“What’s all this about?” Red asked.

“I just want to thank you,” Goldilocks said. “What you’ve done for us is so generous; we’ll never be able to repay you.”

Red looked like she was about to cry. “You’re so welcome,” Red said. “And even though we’ve both tried to kill each other—I tricked you into going in a house with three furious bears; you tried to throw me into a bottomless pit—I would like it very much if we put the past aside and let our friendship bloom even more.”

Goldilocks smiled at her. “I think that’s a wonderful idea, Red,” she said. “Now, if you’ll just excuse me, I’m going to step out for a moment.”

Goldilocks gave Red another hug and excused herself from the dining room. The dessert was finally served, and Conner looked up and down the table to make sure his piece of cake wasn’t any smaller than the rest of theirs.

“Hey, that’s not fair, Red got two pieces of—” Conner stopped himself mid-complaint. Something was different; he was looking at Red without squinting. “Hey, Red, where’s your necklace?”

“My necklace?” Red asked. She reached up to her neck and screamed when she discovered her diamond necklace was missing. “That doesn’t make any sense! How could it have possibly vanished—*GOLDILOCKS!*”

Both the twins turned to Jack. He wiped his mouth with his napkin, trying to hide a giant grin underneath it.

Sir Lampton suddenly rushed into the dining room. He had built a reputation of constantly bringing such awful news in the last few days, the entire room went silent to hear what he had to say.

“Yes, Sir Lampton?” King Chance asked.

“Pardon my intrusion, Your Majesty,” Lampton said. “With all due respect, did you give Goldilocks permission to take one of the horses from the stable, or has one just been stolen?”

Everyone’s eyes immediately darted to Jack. “Well, that’s my cue,” he said and stood up from the table. “Alex and Conner, it was wonderful to see you again and I’d like to thank everyone else for a lovely evening and a wonderful dinner. *Good night*.”

With that said, Jack ran down the dining hall and jumped out of the closest window. Red leaped up from the table and ran over to the window. Froggy and the twins followed her and peered through it.

They arrived just in time to see Jack sliding down the slanted roof and landing perfectly on the back of a horse that Goldilocks held the reins of on the ground. They both waved up at Red, Froggy, and the twins—Red’s necklace sparkled in the moonlight on Goldilocks’s neck.

“That’s my necklace!” Red yelled. *“Bring that back to me at once!”*

Goldilocks yanked on the reins and she and Jack rode off into the night—happy outlaws once again.

Red slammed her hands on the windowsill. “I cannot believe I wasted an ounce of generosity on *that woman*!” she yelled. “Sir Lampton, I want you to put a team of your finest men together and go after her at once!”

“But I don’t work for you,” Lampton said.

“No excuses, Lampton! Find them!” Red demanded.

Lampton looked to King Chance and Cinderella—they both shrugged. “Right away, Queen Red,” Lampton said with a sigh and left the room.

Alex, Conner, and Froggy couldn’t help but laugh as they watched their friends ride off into the night. Much as it distressed Red, they were happy to see Jack and Goldilocks return to their own habitat.

Charlotte and Bob’s wedding was just two days later. The entire palace was decorated in flowers and giant banners. Bells rang through the entire kingdom. In Charming tradition, the twins’ grandmother transformed their mother’s nursing scrubs into a beautiful white gown and veil.

Alex and Conner had never seen her look so beautiful, and both grew a little misty-eyed because of it. They were so happy to see their mom get the wedding she deserved.

The ceremony was held in the ballroom, and it was so crowded the twins thought the entire Charming Kingdom might have shown up. The Fairy Godmother conducted the ceremony herself. Princess Hope was led down the aisle by her mother and acted as a flower girl. Conner was Bob’s best man and Alex was her mother’s maid of honor.

“Do you, Charlotte, take this man to be your husband?” the Fairy Godmother asked.

“I do,” Charlotte said.

“And do you, Robert, take this woman to be your wife?”

“I do,” Bob said.

The vows were only interrupted once as Red loudly blew her nose from the seats—overcome by the ceremony and still upset at losing her favorite necklace.

“By the power invested in me by the Happily Ever After Assembly, I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the Fairy Godmother happily called out. “You may now kiss the bride.”

The twins both turned their heads the other way and the crowd cheered. Bob, Charlotte, and the twins then got into a carriage in the shape of a pumpkin and rode through the Charming Kingdom streets, waving to all the well-wishers who had gathered there.

“I think this family is off to a good start,” Conner said.

That evening, as soon as all the festivities were over, the Fairy Council met the Fairy Godmother at the Charming Palace. They were there on official council business and called together a meeting so exclusive no one but the fairies was allowed to be a part of it. The Fairy Godmother waved her wand and made a door appear that led into the Otherworld, and she and the other fairies waited for Mother Goose to arrive so the meeting could start.

Mother Goose eventually emerged through the door, dragging her basket of a suitcase and a very defiant and reluctant Lester with her.

"Come on, Lester," she said. "I know you love the slot machines, but we can't stay in Vegas forever."

If her appearance was any indication, Mother Goose had done a lot of traveling in the last week. She wore a large sombrero that said TIJUANA across it, a colorful Hawaiian lei around her neck, a large I LOVE NY T-shirt, and wooden Dutch shoes. A foam finger from a football game was still over her hand.

"Looks like you were busy, O.M.G.," Conner said.

"Hey, C-Dog, just because you and your sister saved the world doesn't mean you get to be sassy," Mother Goose snapped at him. "I was afraid the Enchantress was going to cross into the Otherworld, so I went to all my favorite places before she could destroy them."

Alex looked over her worldly outfit. "I see you went to Mexico, New York, Hawaii, and a football game—but where are the shoes from?" she asked.

"Amsterdam," Mother Goose said. "They love me over there."

"I didn't know nursery rhymes were popular in Amsterdam," Conner said.

"They're not," Mother Goose said. "They don't know me as Mother Goose; they have their own nickname for me when I visit."

"What's that?" Alex asked.

"Mother Mayhem," she said.

The twins just nodded, not wanting to know any details.

"All right, let's get this hen in the oven!" Mother Goose said and clapped her hands. She followed the Fairy Council into a private drawing room.

"It's about time you showed up," Tangerina said.

“Mind your beeswax, Tangy,” Mother Goose said. “No, I’m serious—your bees are getting that crap all over the floor.”

The fairies shut the door tightly behind them. Naturally, the twins placed their ears up to the door and tried eavesdropping as much as possible.

“The world is still in shambles,” the twins heard Emerelda’s voice fade in and out. “We’re slowly clearing the Eastern Kingdom of all the thornbushes and vines.… The Northern Kingdom has finally rid itself of all the poisoned food.… Ezmia’s pillar of rock and dirt still needs to be removed… and there’s one thing that we haven’t discussed yet that involved you, Fairy Godmother.”

The twins looked to each other; their curiosity consumed them whole.

“I’ll be right back,” Conner said. A few moments later he returned with empty glasses from the palace kitchen. He handed one to Alex and they placed them over the door and up to their ears. They could hear what the fairies were saying much more clearly now.

“You understand how difficult that will be for my family, don’t you?” they heard their grandmother say.

“We’re not proposing it to be cruel; we’re proposing it to be preventative,” Skylene said.

“If we don’t do something, it’ll only be a matter of time before someone else follows in the Enchantress’s footsteps,” Xanthous said.

“In the end, it’s your decision,” Emerelda said. “It’s *your* gift—*you* were chosen to be the gatekeeper. We can only tell you what we think is best for both worlds.”

Alex and Conner looked at each other.

“I understand,” their grandmother said. “And if it’s what the rest of you think is the right thing to do, I cannot ignore that. I just don’t know how I’m going to break the news to my grandchildren.”

“You can take as much time as you need,” Emerelda said.

The twins heard them start to come toward the door and ran down the hall so they wouldn’t be caught listening.

Their curiosity ate them alive for the rest of the day. What was the news their grandmother was going to have difficulty telling them? Why did it affect them and her ability to move between the worlds? The twins’

imaginations didn’t do them any favors as they thought on what the possibilities could be.

Luckily, they weren’t forced to suffer too long. That night after dinner the Fairy Council called everyone into the ballroom to fill them in on what they had discussed.

“It’s going to take some time before the world can fully recover from the damage the Enchantress caused,” Emerelda said. “Ezmia may be gone, but the fact is, what she tried to accomplish still remains a possibility as long as the two worlds are joined.”

“So what are you saying?” Conner said.

The Fairy Godmother closed her eyes, not wanting to see her grandchildren’s faces when they heard it.

“For the greater good of both worlds, we have decided to close the gateway between them,” Emerelda said.

Alex felt like she was being told her father was dead or her mother had been kidnapped all over again. Her stomach tightened and her heart beat at a rapid pace. She felt her palms go clammy and the rest of her body go numb.

“What?” she asked breathlessly.

“How is that even possible?” Conner asked. He also was having an incredibly hard time processing the news.

“It’s possible if we use our magic together,” their grandmother regretfully told them.

“So what does that mean?” Conner asked. “Does that mean we’ll never be able to see you again?”

Their grandmother shook her head, happy to report one small consolation. “I was able to convince the other fairies to supply us with a way to see each other,” she said. She waved her wand, and two long, square mirrors with golden frames appeared. “We’ll be able to see each other using these mirrors whenever we want; we just won’t be able to—”

“Travel between worlds?” Conner asked.

Their grandmother closed her eyes and nodded her head. It was clearly almost as painful for her to tell them as it was for them to hear it. Alex was shaking her head profusely and tears began running down her face.

“No, Grandma,” Alex pleaded. *“Tell me it isn’t true.”*

“I’m afraid so, honey,” Grandma said.

Alex lost it completely and buried her head in her mother's side. She cried so hard she was practically silent except for her deep gasps for air. Charlotte tried to remain strong for her kids but she was having a hard time keeping it together herself—she knew what the news meant for them.

"And you're okay with this?" Conner yelled. Tears spilled down from his own eyes.

"I hate it as much as you do," their grandma said. "But to secure the safety of both worlds we don't have another option."

Conner could only get one word of his next question out. *"When?"* he said, and his voice cracked as he fought back emotion.

"Tomorrow at dusk," his grandmother said, waging her own emotional battle inside.

Alex couldn't stand to hear any more of it. She ran from the ballroom and headed up the stairs to her chambers, her hands covering her face as she went.

"Alex?" Charlotte called out, but it was no use.

Alex shut the door to her chambers behind her and collapsed on the floor. She cried and cried for hours and hours. She had lived through the fear of losing the fairy-tale world so many times, and now it was real; it was actually being taken away from her.

And of all times, her greatest fear had been realized right after she'd learned how much potential she had to offer this world. Right after she'd discovered she had a chance at being the future Fairy Godmother someday. Right after her uncertain future had nearly been set—it was all being taken from her.

It felt like the Land of Stories had always been dangled in front of her and her brother like a taunting cat toy. Every time they thought they had finally grabbed hold of it, it slipped out of their grip. She cried until her tear ducts dried up and she couldn't cry anymore. She lay on the bed and prayed there would be some way around this nightmare.

A soft knock came at the door. "Alex, can I come in?" Charlotte asked from the other side.

"Sure," Alex said.

Charlotte walked into the room and took a seat on the bed next to her devastated daughter.

“It’s so unfair, Mom,” Alex said. “After everything we’ve been through… after everything we’ve seen… why does this have to be taken from us, too?”

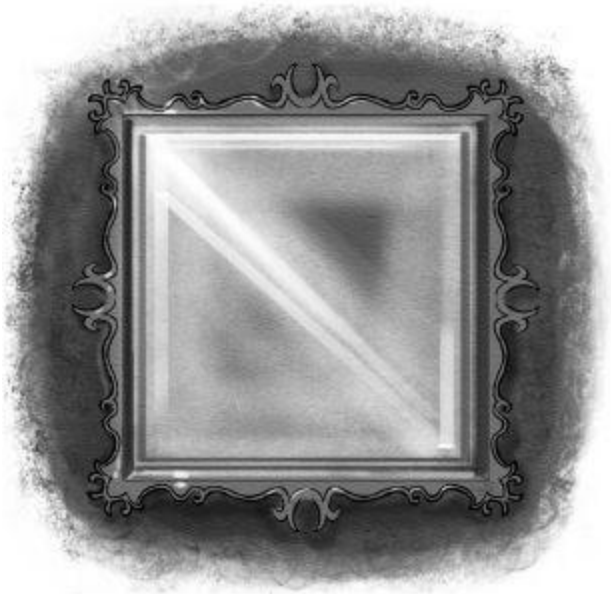
Charlotte rubbed her hand gently on Alex’s knee. Alex sat up and looked at her mom; she was crying almost more than Alex had been.

“Why are you crying so much, Mom?” Alex asked. “You’re not losing anything.”

Charlotte smiled. “Oh, but I am, honey,” she said. “A year ago when you and your brother first came back from this place, I knew then I had lost my little girl forever. I watched her grow sadder and sadder the more time she spent away from this place, and I knew there was nothing I could ever do to help her—because her heart belonged somewhere else.”

“Mom, what are you talking about?” Alex asked.

Charlotte put a hand on Alex’s face and looked at her daughter through the tears in her eyes. “I’m saying I’m not going to let you leave the place where you belong,” she said.



CHAPTER THIRTY

THE GOOD-BYE

Conner woke up the next morning with a mission. Before anyone else had woken, he ran down to the stables and arranged for a carriage to take him into the countryside. He kept his activities a complete secret from anyone else, fearing someone would stop him if he made his plans known. He didn't return until that evening just before dusk—and he didn't return alone. The carriage door swung open, and three additional passengers emerged from it.

Conner had brought Lady Iris, Petunia, and Rosemary back with him. After they'd spent nearly a decade suffering through constant public persecution, Conner had offered them the only chance at refuge they had ever received—and after hearing hours of Conner's descriptions, the sequestered family of women finally jumped at the chance.

They were carrying as many of their belongings as they could. Lady Iris held on to the painting of her late husband; Rosemary held her favorite cooking bowl; and Petunia grasped a stack of rolled-up animal portraits under her arm.

"There's this thing called culinary school that you're going to love, Rosemary," Conner was saying, further listing the perks of his dimension. "And just wait until I introduce you to *Animal Planet*, Petunia."

Sir Lampton emerged down the front steps of the palace toward the carriage. "What's going on here?" he asked Conner.

Conner pulled him aside so the women couldn't hear him. "I'm taking them back to the Otherworld with us," he said.

"*You're what?!*" Lampton said.

"I explained everything to them; it took them a while to understand, but they want to leave," Conner said. "Lampton, they're miserable here—they don't gain anything by staying. If they come with us they'll at least have a *chance* at starting a better life."

"Why would you help *them*?" Lampton asked.

Conner sighed and looked to the ground. "Because I'll never be able to help my sister," he said. "Alex isn't like me—she's going to be miserable

the rest of her life without this place. At least if I bring Lady Iris with us there'll be something worth looking forward to."

Lampton had his reservations but admired the boy's generosity nonetheless. "You're a good man, Conner Bailey," he said. "Everyone is gathering in the gardens for the final good-bye. Please escort your *guests* down there."

Conner nodded and led the women around the side of the castle to the beautiful gardens. The Charming garden was home to an exquisite display of yellow roses, pear trees, and a hedge labyrinth. It was a beautiful place to say a distressing good-bye.

Froggy, Red, King Chance, Cinderella, and Mother Goose had already gathered in the gardens. Cinderella had to do a double take as Conner approached—she hadn't been expecting to see her stepmother and stepsisters walking behind him.

"Stepmother?" Cinderella called out. "Rosemary? Petunia?"

Even though they knew they were headed to the palace, Lady Iris and her daughters had almost hoped they wouldn't run into her.

"Hello, Cinderella," Lady Iris said.

"What are you doing here?" Cinderella asked. She looked over all the belongings they carried and answered her own question.

Lady Iris thought for a moment about what to tell her. "We've decided it would be best to leave the Charming Kingdom," she said.

"I see," Cinderella said. She didn't argue with her stepmother, knowing her reasons better than anyone. "Where are you headed?"

Lady Iris hesitated to say. "The *Otherworld*, as fate would have it," she said. "I think a fresh start would do the girls and me some good. We'll be able to live in a place where people won't judge us as harshly, or throw rocks at the house, or boo us when we leave it."

All Cinderella could do was nod. She might have built a gate around their property, but she could never take away all the oppression they faced on a daily basis.

"What are you going to do there?" Cinderella asked.

"The boy was telling me of a place called *Florida* that I might be interested in," Lady Iris said.

"I'm going to be a chef," Rosemary said.

“I’m going to do something with animals,” Petunia said. “They have so many more animals in the Otherworld than we have. There’s apparently this creature called the *honey badger* that I hear is fascinating.”

Cinderella was pleased for them, but couldn’t deny she was sorry to be losing the only family she had outside the king and princess.

“I’m so happy for you,” she said, although they knew better.

“We’re doing this for you, too, Cinderella,” Lady Iris said. “You won’t have any black sheep to worry about lingering around now. You can raise Princess Hope without ever having to tell her about us, if you’d like.”

Cinderella nodded. “But I plan on telling Hope everything about you,” she said. “Especially the part about her grandmother helping a small band of courageous sailors defeat the evil enchantress who took her from us.”

Lady Iris hadn’t expected them to remember her request. “Did they tell you I assisted?” she asked.

“No, they didn’t have to,” Cinderella said. She pulled a ring off her finger she wore next to her wedding ring—it was her *stepmother’s* wedding ring. “The Wand it was a part of was destroyed, but I recognized the ring—any girl would recognize her own mother’s wedding ring. I figured you would want it back.”

Lady Iris stared down at the ring. “I don’t know what to say,” she said, touched by the gesture. The girl she had been so cruel to was still showing her kindness even now. “Thank you, Cinderella. You continue to grow into a much better woman than I could ever be.”

Cinderella smiled. She hugged her stepmother and her stepsisters for the first and final time. Red and Froggy took their lead to start their own good-byes.

“I’m going to miss you, old chap,” Froggy said to Conner and gave him a giant hug.

“I’m going to miss you, too,” Conner said. “And just to let you know, whenever I think about you, I’m always going to remember a giant frog.”

Froggy chuckled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he said.

Red kissed Conner on the cheek. “You are the sweetest boy I know,” she said. “Then again, I rarely socialize with anyone of a lower age or social class.”

“Hey, kid,” Mother Goose said and pulled Conner aside. She slipped a blue poker chip into his hand. “If you’re ever in Monte Carlo, go to the

roulette table in the northwest corner of the Lumière des Etoiles casino and bet this on black." She winked at him and patted him firmly on the back.

"Thanks?" Conner said.

The Fairy Council arrived promptly a few moments later. They took their positions in a big half-circle around the gardens to begin sealing the gateway between the worlds.

"We're just waiting for the Fairy Godmother and the others," Emerelda said. "If those of you leaving this world would please just take a step forward."

Conner, Lady Iris, Rosemary, and Petunia all edged forward on the grass, stepping into the center of the crescent shape the council formed.

"Here they come now," Skylene said.

Conner turned to see his grandmother, Charlotte, Bob, and his sister walking down from the palace. Bob was carrying one of the golden mirrors his grandmother had convinced the Fairy Council of approving securely under his arm. Conner avoided looking at his sister, knowing whatever devastated expression was on her face would make him more heartbroken than he already was.

As soon as his grandmother reached the gardens, she threw her arms around Conner and said a tearful good-bye.

"You take good care of yourself, do you understand?" she said to him.

"I love you, Grandma," Conner said.

"And I love you, my darling boy," she said and wiped the tears off of her face. "I'm going to talk to you every Sunday evening through the mirror—I don't care how busy you are, there is no excuse to miss it!" She playfully pointed her finger at him.

"I'll be there." He laughed.

The sun began to set and the sky darkened. All the fairies in the half-circle nodded to one another.

"It's time," Emerelda said. "Fairy Godmother, if you will please create a portal for our travelers—for the last time."

The Fairy Godmother reluctantly nodded. She stood in front of the council and they joined hands behind her. The wind began to pick up and circled around them as their spell began, blowing the petals of the pear blossoms around like a blizzard.

The Fairy Godmother waved her crystal wand and cracked it like a whip. A large tear appeared in the air, as if the worlds had been ripped at the seam. Everyone stared at it in awe. Conner could see the living room of their rental house on the other side of it.

“It’s done,” the Fairy Godmother said and turned back to the other fairies. “As soon as the portal closes, the gateway will be closed forever.”

The top and the bottom of the portal began retracting inward, and the seam between the worlds started closing for good. Charlotte and Bob joined Conner and the women in the center, but Alex stayed behind by the fairies.

“Alex, come on, let’s go,” Conner called to his sister.

Alex didn’t move. For the first time Conner noticed she wasn’t wearing her normal clothes. Instead, she wore a bright blue robe that sparkled like a night sky—just like their grandmother’s. A headband made of the same white flowers their grandmother wore was in Alex’s hair and she held a long crystal wand—also just like their grandmother’s.

“Alex, why are you dressed like that?” Conner asked.

Alex’s eyes welled up instantly. She looked from her mother to her grandmother for support and took a deep breath before breaking the news to him. “Because I’m staying,” Alex said.

Conner felt like he had been kicked in the stomach. “You’re *what*?!!” he said.

Alex had known this would be one of the most difficult moments of her life, but she never could have imagined it was going to be *this* hard.

“I’m staying here with Grandma,” Alex said. “I was going to tell you this morning, but you were gone by the time I woke up.”

Conner couldn’t believe what he was hearing—he didn’t want to believe it. He turned to his mother, hoping she would talk sense into his sister.

“Mom, tell Alex she’s crazy if she thinks she’s staying here,” he said. But his mother didn’t immediately reprimand her like he had expected; she just gazed at Alex with large watery eyes.

“She’s telling the truth, Conner,” Charlotte said.

Conner looked back and forth between them, shaking his head. “No, this can’t be real,” he said to himself. “Why would you let her do something like that?”

Charlotte placed a hand on her son's shoulder. "One day when you have kids, Conner, you'll discover that your biggest fear is not always making good decisions for your children—and while I know I'll always regret the decision to let her stay, I'll always know it was the right decision," she said. "You know as much as I do that your sister belongs here."

Conner felt like he had been ambushed. He looked to his grandmother, but there was no sign of an alternative answer in her eyes.

"Alex, what about school?" Conner said. "What about graduation? What about college? What about starting families of our own someday? Are you just going to throw all of those things away?"

Alex wiped the tears from her face, even though they were quickly replaced with fresh streams.

"There's nothing you're going to say now or in a year that I wouldn't have thought about a hundred times," Alex said. "This isn't easy for me, Conner, but I know it's what I have to do."

"You mean you've been planning this?" Conner said. He was so angry she had even considered something so drastic without telling him.

"I've thought about it every day since we got back the first time," Alex said. "I never thought the conditions would be so severe—but it was even in the Snow Queen's prophecy; we just didn't recognize it. *'Of the four travelers, one will not return'*—she was talking about you, me, Mom, and Bob. *We* were the four travelers, not the ones aboard the *Granny*."

"You're going to regret this," Conner said. "One day you're going to look back and wish you hadn't left me and Mom—"

"No, I won't," Alex said. "Because I couldn't live without this world now that I know how much it offers me."

Conner felt like he was in a nightmare.

"Alex, I've never been anywhere without you in my entire life," Conner said. "We can't live worlds apart!"

"Don't you get it, Conner?" Alex said. "We were always meant to live worlds apart. Magic chose us to be the bridge between the two worlds—it's the reason there are two of us. I was always meant to stay here and succeed Grandma in magic, and you were meant to go to the Otherworld and continue her storytelling. Do you think it's just a coincidence that you turned out to be such a good writer?"

Every fiber of his being wanted to argue with her; every inch of him wanted to reject what she was telling him—but something about seeing his sister among the fairies made him feel like everything was right in the world, even though his was crashing around him.

Alex stepped toward him and gave him the biggest hug she had ever given him. “We’ll always be together, Conner,” Alex said. “In our hearts and in your stories—every time you pen another story about our adventures in the Land of Stories, I’ll be right there with you. And when that isn’t enough, we can always see each other in the mirrors.”

Emerelda was the only one eyeing the portal. “The gateway is closing,” she said. “You have to leave soon before you’re *all* trapped in this world.”

For every tear that rolled down Conner’s face there were a dozen he fought back. He knew there was no going back now—Alex had made up her mind. There were so many things to say and not enough time to say it. Conner made sure to make his final moments with his sister count and said the only thing that mattered.

“I love you, Alex,” he said and hugged her.

“I love you, too, Conner,” she said and hugged him back. They could both feel each other’s tears on the back of their necks.

One by one, Lady Iris, Rosemary, Petunia, and Bob stepped through the seam between worlds and disappeared. Charlotte gave Alex one last hug before stepping through it, and Conner followed her. He watched his sister through the seam as it slowly closed and the fairy-tale world vanished before his eyes—they were now dimensions apart, yet both the twins were finally *home.*

Alex was right—Conner could still feel her in his heart. However, underneath the pain of saying good-bye was a lingering certainty that their good-bye wouldn’t last forever. Despite what the fairies told him, Conner knew in his heart that his and Alex’s story was far from over.

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Contents

COVER

TITLE PAGE

WELCOME

DEDICATION

EPIGRAPH

PROLOGUE: THE RISE AND THE RETURN

CHAPTER ONE: A TRAIN OF THOUGHTS

CHAPTER TWO: IT STARTED WITH A DOG

CHAPTER THREE: LUNCH IN THE LIBRARY

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

CHAPTER FIVE: THE PROPOSAL

CHAPTER SIX: POSITIONING THE GNOMES

CHAPTER SEVEN: LOOSEY GOOSEY

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE COTTAGE

CHAPTER NINE: THE GATHERING IN THE WOODS

CHAPTER TEN: RUMPELSTILTSKIN'S DEBT

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE QUEEN AND THE FROG

CHAPTER TWELVE: A NOT-SO-CHARMING EVENING

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: JARS OF SOULS

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE WAND OF WONDERMENT

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: BEAN THERE, DONE THAT

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: FLIGHT OF THE GRANNY

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE SNOW QUEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE WICKED STEPMOTHER

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE CASTLE IN THE SKY

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE REFLECTION

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: THE SEA WITCH

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: TROLLBELLA, QUEEN OF THE TROBLINS

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: THE EIGHTH DWARF

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE LADY OF THE EAST

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: ROCK, ROOT, AND RAGE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: THE ENCHANTRESS'S MOST PRIZED POSSESSION

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: THE DREAM

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE GREATEST MAGIC OF ALL

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: FOR BETTER, OR FOR WORSE

CHAPTER THIRTY: THE GOOD-BYE

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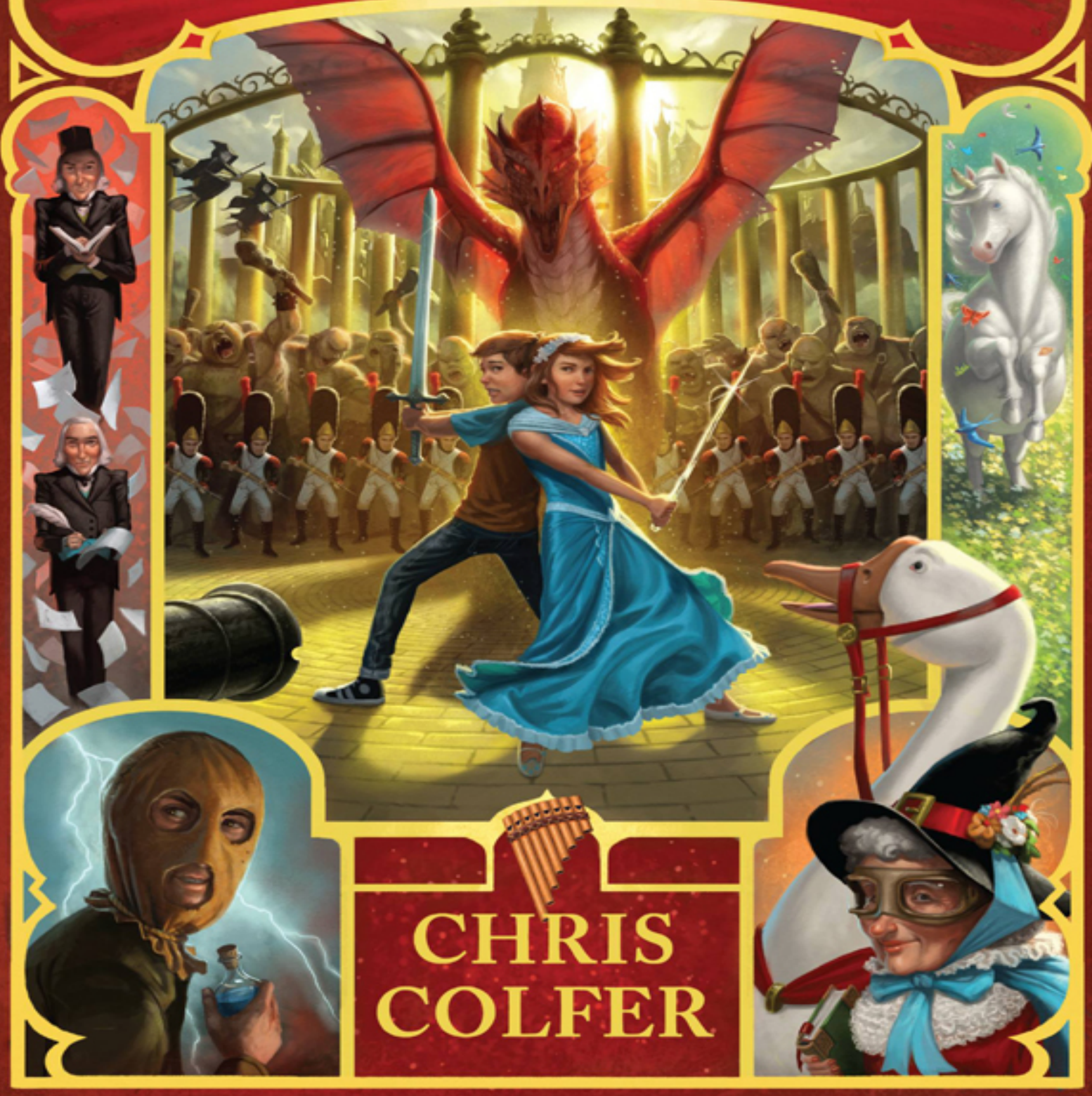
The Land of Stories

A Grimm Warning



CHRIS COLFER

The Land of Stories

A Grimm Warning

CHRIS COLFER

Illustrated by Brandon Dorman

Little, Brown and Company

New York Boston

Begin Reading

Table of Contents

Copyright Page

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To J. K. Rowling, C. S. Lewis, Roald Dahl, Eva Ibbotson, L. Frank Baum, James M. Barrie, Lewis Carroll, and all the other extraordinary authors who taught the world to believe in magic. When I think of all the time I spent inspecting wardrobes, spotting second stars to the right, and waiting for my Hogwarts acceptance letter—it's no wonder I didn't get good grades.

Also, to all the teachers and librarians who have expressed their support for this series and incorporated it into their classrooms. It means more to me than words can describe.

“YOU HAVE ENEMIES? GOOD. THAT MEANS YOU’VE STOOD UP FOR SOMETHING, SOMETIME IN YOUR LIFE.”

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

FAIRY

PROLOGUE

GUESTS OF THE GRANDE ARMÉE

1811, Black Forest, Confederation of the Rhine

It was no mystery why this part of the countryside had been christened the Black Forest. The abnormally dark leaves and tree bark were nearly impossible to see in the night. Even though a bright moon peeked out from the clouds like a shy child, no one could be certain what was lurking in the thick woods.

A chill lingered in the air like a veil spread across the trees. It was a remote and mature forest; roots sank as deep into the ground as branches reached high into the sky. Had it not been for a modest path winding through the terrain the forest would have seemed completely untouched and unseen by human eyes.

A dark carriage pulled by four strong horses shot through the forest like a cannonball. A pair of swinging lanterns illuminated the path ahead and made the carriage resemble an enormous creature with glowing eyes. Two French soldiers of Napoleon's Grande Armée rode beside the carriage. Black cloaks covered the soldiers' colorful uniforms so they could travel in secrecy—the world was never to know what their agenda was tonight.

Soon the carriage arrived at the edge of the Rhine River, dangerously close to the border of the ever-growing French Empire. A large camp was being set up, with dozens of pointed beige tents pitched every moment by hundreds of French soldiers.

The two soldiers following the carriage dismounted their horses and opened the carriage doors. They yanked two men out from inside. The men's hands were tied behind their backs and they had black sacks over their heads. They grunted and yelled muffled messages—both men had been gagged as well.

The soldiers pushed the men to the center of camp and into the largest tent. Even with their faces covered, the bound men could tell it was very

bright inside the tent and they felt a soft rug beneath their feet. The soldiers forced the men into two wooden chairs farther inside.

"J'ai amené les frères," they heard one of the soldiers say behind them.

"Merci, Capitaine," another voice said in front of them. *"Le général sera bientôt là."*

The sacks were pulled off the men's faces and the cloths around their mouths were removed. Once their eyes adjusted to the light they could see a tall and muscular man standing behind a large wooden desk. His posture was authoritative and his scowl was anything but friendly.

"Hello, Brothers Grimm," the tall man said with a thick accent. "I am Colonel Philippe Baton. Thank you for joining us this evening."

Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm stared up at the colonel. They were cut up and bruised, and their clothing was disheveled—clearly it had been a struggle getting them here.

"Did we have a choice?" Jacob asked, spitting a mouthful of blood on the rug.

"I trust you're already acquainted with Capitaine De Lange and Lieutenant Rembert," Colonel Baton said, referring to the soldiers who had brought them.

"*Acquainted* is not the word I would use," Wilhelm said.

"We tried to be polite, Colonel, but they would not cooperate," Capitaine De Lange informed his colonel.

"We had to be *aggressive* with our invitation," Lieutenant Rembert explained.

The brothers looked around the tent—it was impeccably decorated for having been so recently assembled. A grandfather clock ticked the night away in the far corner, shiny twin candelabras burned on either side of the tent's back entrance, and a large map of Europe was spread across the wooden desk with miniature French flags pinning the conquered territories.

"What do you want with us?" Jacob demanded, struggling against the ropes tying his hands.

"Surely if you wanted us dead you would have killed us by now," Wilhelm said, struggling against his own restraints.

Their discourteousness made the colonel scowl even harder. "General Marquis has requested your presence tonight not to *harm you*, but to ask for your *assistance*," Colonel Baton said. "But if I were you, I would change

my tone so he does not change his mind."

The Brothers Grimm looked at each other nervously. General Jacques du Marquis was one of the most feared generals in the French Empire's Grande Armée. Just hearing his name sent shivers down their spines—but what on earth did he want with them?

An undeniable musk suddenly filled the tent. The Brothers Grimm could tell the soldiers smelled it, too, and grew tense from it, although no one mentioned it.

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk*, Colonel," said a wispy voice from outside the tent. "That is no way to treat our guests." Whoever it was had obviously been listening the entire time.

General Marquis stepped into the tent from between the candelabras, causing the flames to flicker from the sudden burst of air. The tent immediately filled with the strong musky smell of his cologne.

"General Jacques du Marquis?" Jacob asked.

For a man with such an intimidating reputation, his physicality was a bit disappointing. He was a short man with large gray eyes and big hands. He wore a large rounded hat that was broader than his shoulders and several badges of honor were displayed on his tiny uniform. He removed his hat and placed it on top of the desk, revealing a perfectly bald head. He took a casual seat in the large cushioned chair behind the desk, neatly folding his hands over his stomach.

"Capitaine De Lange, Lieutenant Rembert, please untie our visitors," General Marquis instructed. "Just because we are living in hostile times does not mean we have to be inhospitable."

The captain and lieutenant did as they were instructed. A pleasant smile appeared on the general's face but it didn't fool the Brothers Grimm—his eyes were empty of compassion.

"Why have you forced us to come here tonight?" Wilhelm said. "We pose no threat to you or the French Empire."

"We're academics and authors! There's nothing to gain from us," Jacob said.

The general gave a little laugh and then placed an apologetic hand over his mouth.

"That is a nice story, but I know better than that," Marquis said. "You see, I've been watching you, Brothers Grimm, and I know that, like all your

stories, there is more to *you* than meets the eye. *Donnez-moi le livre!*”

The general snapped his fingers and Colonel Baton retrieved a large book from inside the desk. He dropped it with a *thud* in front of the general, who began flipping through its pages. The Brothers Grimm instantly recognized the book—it was theirs.

“Does this look familiar?” General Marquis asked.

“That’s a copy of our book of children’s stories,” Wilhelm said.

“*Oui*.” The general didn’t look up from its pages. “I am a major admirer of yours, Brothers Grimm. Your stories are so imaginative, so *merveilleuses* —where did you come up with all these stories?”

The Brothers Grimm looked at each other cautiously, still unsure what he was getting at.

“They’re just fairy tales,” Jacob said. “Some are original but most are just folktales that have been passed down from generation to generation.”

General Marquis slowly nodded as he listened. “But passed down by *whom*?” he asked, and slammed shut the book of stories. His pleasant smile faded, and his gray eyes darted back and forth between the brothers.

Neither Wilhelm nor Jacob knew what answer the general was looking for. “By families, by cultures, by children, by their parents, by—”

“Fairies?” the general said in total seriousness, not moving a single muscle in his face.

The room went dead silent. Once the silence reached an uncomfortably long amount of time Wilhelm looked at Jacob and they both forced a laugh, making light of the assertion.

“Fairies?” Wilhelm asked. “You think fairies gave us these stories?”

“Fairies aren’t real, General,” Jacob said.

General Marquis’s left eye began to twitch violently, which took the brothers by surprise. The general closed his eyes and slowly massaged his face until the spasms stopped.

“Forgive me, Brothers Grimm,” the general apologized with another fake smile. “My eye always begins to twitch when I am being *lied to*.”

“We aren’t lying to you, General,” Jacob said. “But if our stories have convinced you otherwise then you have given us the greatest of compliments—”

“SILENCE!” General Marquis ordered, and his eye began pulsing again. “You insult my intelligence, Brothers Grimm! We have been following you

for quite some time. We know about the sparkling woman who brings you the stories!”

The Brothers Grimm went completely still. Their hearts were racing, and beads of sweat appeared on their foreheads. They had both been faithful to a vow of secrecy for years, but still the greatest secret of their lives had been uncovered.

“A *sparkling woman*?” Wilhelm asked. “General, do you hear what you are saying? This is ludicrous.”

“My men saw it with their own eyes,” General Marquis said. “She wears robes that sparkle like the night sky, has white flowers in her hair, and carries a long crystal wand—bringing you a new story for your books every time she returns. But from *where* does she appear? That’s what I’ve been asking myself. After countless days of looking over every map I own, I must assume she’s from a place that can’t be seen on any map of mine.”

Wilhelm and Jacob shook their heads, desperately trying to deny all that he said. But how could they deny the truth?

“You military men are all alike,” Jacob said. “You’ve already conquered half of the known world and yet you still want *more*—so you make up things to believe in! You’re King Arthur obsessing over the Holy Grail—”

“Apportez-moi l’oeuf!” General Marquis ordered.

Capitaine De Lange and Lieutenant Rembert stepped out of the tent and returned a moment later carrying a heavy box wrapped in chains. They placed the box on the desk directly in front of General Marquis.

The general reached into his uniform and removed a key he wore safely around his neck. He unlocked the chains and opened the box. First he pulled out a pair of white silk gloves and placed them on his hands. He reached farther into the box and retrieved a giant egg made of the purest gold the brothers had ever seen. The golden egg clearly wasn’t of this world.

“Is this not the most beautiful thing you have ever laid eyes on?” General Marquis said. He was almost in a trance as he stared at the golden egg. “And I believe this is only the beginning—I believe this is just a small sample of the wonders waiting in the world your stories come from, Brothers Grimm. *And you’re going to take us there*.”

“We can’t take you there!” Jacob said. He tried to stand but Lieutenant Rembert pushed him back into his seat.

“The Fairy Godmother—the sparkly woman you speak of—brings us

the stories from her world to share with ours," Wilhelm said.

"She's the only one who can travel between worlds. We've never been there nor can we take you there," Jacob said.

"How did you even get the egg in the first place?" Wilhelm demanded.

General Marquis carefully placed the golden egg back in the box. "From another one of your acquaintances, the *other* woman who gives you stories to share. *Apportez-moi le corps de la femme oiseau!*"

Colonel Baton left the tent and returned a moment later pulling a wagon with bars built around it. He yanked off a sheet covering it and the Brothers Grimm gasped. Lying inside the wagon was the lifeless body of *Mother Goose*.

"What did you do to her?" Wilhelm yelled, trying to stand, but he was forced back into his seat.

"I'm afraid she was poisoned at a local tavern," General Marquis said without remorse. "So sad to see such a spirited woman leave us, but accidents do happen. We found the egg in her possession. Which makes me wonder—if *this old lush* has managed to find a way to travel between worlds, I'm very confident you two can as well."

The brothers' faces were bright red, and their nostrils flared. "And what are you going to do once you get there? Claim the fairy-tale world for the French Empire?" Wilhelm asked.

"Why, yes," General Marquis stated, as if he had made it obvious already.

"You'll never stand a chance!" Jacob declared. "That world has people and creatures you could never imagine! People and creatures more powerful than you will ever be! Your army will be destroyed as soon as you set foot there."

General Marquis let out another laugh.

"That is highly unlikely, Brothers Grimm." The general giggled. "You see, the Grande Armée is planning something very big—there are many territories we're planning to conquer by the end of next year. The fairy-tale world is only a crumb of the cake we're after. As we speak, thousands and thousands of French soldiers are being trained, and they will form the greatest army the world has ever seen. I very much doubt anything will stand in our way—not the Egyptians, not the Russians, not the Austrians, and certainly not a bunch of fairies and goblins."

“So what do you expect from us?” Wilhelm asked. “What if we can’t supply you with a portal into this other world?”

The general smiled, but it was sincere this time. His eyes filled with greed as he finally told them what he wanted.

“You have two months to find a way into this world of stories, Brothers Grimm,” Marquis said.

“But what if we can’t?” Jacob said. “Like I said, the Fairy Godmother is very mysterious. We may never see her again.”

The general’s face fell into a cold and malicious stare. “*Tsk, tsk, tsk*, Brothers Grimm,” he said. “You won’t fail, because the future of your friends and family depends on you. I know you won’t let them down.”

A quiet snort filled the tense room—but it didn’t come from either of the Brothers Grimm. Jacob looked toward the caged wagon and saw Mother Goose smack her lips. To the amazement of everyone in the tent, Mother Goose stirred back to life as if she was waking up from a long night’s rest.

“Where am I?” Mother Goose said. She sat up and rubbed her head. She cracked her neck and let out a long yawn. “Oh no, did Spain start another Inquisition? How long have I been knocked out?”

The general slowly got to his feet and his eyes grew in bewilderment. “But how is this possible? She was poisoned!” he said to himself.

“Well, I wouldn’t say *poisoned*… but maybe a little *over-served*,” Mother Goose said as she looked around the tent. “Let’s see. The last thing I remember is being at my favorite alehouse in Bavaria. The barkeep there has a very generous pour—his name is Lester, he’s a sweet man and an old friend of mine. Always said I would name my first child after him if I ever had one—*wait a second! Jacob? Willy? What in the name of Merlin are you two doing here?*”

“We’ve been kidnapped!” Jacob told her. “These men are planning to invade the fairy-tale world in two months. They’re going to harm our family if we don’t provide them with a portal!”

Mother Goose’s jaw dropped and she looked back and forth between the brothers and the soldiers. She was having enough trouble regaining consciousness in general, but this information made her head spin.

“But… but… but how do they know—?”

“They’ve been following us,” Jacob said. “All of us—they have your golden egg! They have an army of thousands and want to claim the fairy-

tale world in the name of France—”

“Silence!” Colonel Baton demanded of the brothers.

General Marquis raised a hand to silence the colonel. “No, Colonel, it’s fine. Because this woman is going to *help* our friends fulfill our request. After all, she wouldn’t want anything to happen to the Grimm family, either.”

He peered through the bars at her as if she were an animal. Mother Goose was no stranger to waking up in peculiar places and situations but *this* took the cake. She had always feared the secret of her world would be revealed but never thought it would be under such extreme circumstances.

Her cheeks turned bright red and she began to panic. *“I gotta go!”* she said. She reached out an open hand and the golden egg floated straight out of the box and into the wagon where she sat. And with a blinding flash, Mother Goose and the golden egg disappeared into thin air.

The soldiers around the tent began to yell, but the general remained very still. The determination in his eyes grew as he stared at the wagon Mother Goose vanished from—it was the most amazing thing he had ever witnessed and had proven everything he was after was *real.*

“Général, quelles sont vos instructions?” Colonel Baton asked, anxious to know what his next instructions were.

The general looked to the ground as he decided. *“Emmenez-les!”* he said, and gestured to the Brothers Grimm. Before they knew it, the brothers were gagged again, their hands retied behind their backs, and the black sacks placed over their heads.

“Two months, Brothers Grimm,” the general said, unable to tear his eyes away from the wagon. “Find a portal in two months or I’ll make you watch as I personally kill everyone you love!”

The Brothers Grimm moaned under their masks. Capitaine De Lange and Lieutenant Rembert forced them onto their feet and out of the tent. The whole camp could hear their muffled moans as they were pushed into the carriage and sent away into the dark forest.

General Marquis sat back in his seat. He let out a pleased sigh as his heartbeat and his racing mind caught up with each other. His eyes fell upon the Brothers Grimm storybook on his desk and a soft chuckle surfaced from within him. For the first time the fairy-tale world didn’t seem like an overly ambitious Arthurian quest—it was a victory within reach.

The general took one of the miniature French flags from the map of Europe and stabbed it into the cover of the storybook. Perhaps the Brothers Grimm were right—maybe the fairy-tale world had wonders he couldn’t imagine—but he was imagining them now.…

CHAPTER ONE

AN EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

It was half past midnight and only one light was on in all the homes on Sycamore Drive. In the second-story window of Dr. Robert Gordon's house was a shadow that moved back and forth: It was his stepson, Conner Bailey, pacing around his bedroom. He had known for months he was going to Europe but had waited until the night before his departure to pack.

Reruns of a dramatic television show set in outer space did nothing to stop his procrastination. There was just something about a female captain piloting her crew away from an evil alien race that he couldn't take his eyes off. But looking up at his clock and realizing he only had seven hours before he needed to be at the airport forced him to turn the television off and focus on packing.

"Let me think," Conner said to himself. "I'll be in Germany for three days… so I should probably bring *twelve* pairs of socks." He confidently nodded, and tossed a dozen pairs of socks into his suitcase. "You never know, there could be a lot of puddles in Europe."

Conner retrieved ten or so pairs of underwear from his dresser and laid them out on his bed. It was more than he needed but a traumatizing sleepover in kindergarten that ended in a wet bed had taught Conner to always be generous when packing underwear.

"Okay, I think I have everything," Conner said, and he counted the items in his suitcase. "I've got seven T-shirts, four sweaters, my lucky rock, two scarves, my other lucky rock, underwear, socks, pajamas, my lucky poker chip, and my toothbrush."

He looked around his room, wondering what else a kid could need in Europe.

"Oh, *pants*!" he said, thankful that he'd remembered. "I need pants!"

Once he had added the missing (and vital) articles to his suitcase, Conner sat on the edge of his bed and took a deep breath. A big boyish smile came to his face. He couldn't help it—he was *excited*!

At the end of the previous school year, Conner's principal, Mrs. Peters, had called him into her office to present him with a very exciting opportunity.

"Am I in trouble?" Conner said when he sat down in front of her desk.

"Mr. Bailey, why do you ask me that every time I call you into my office?" she said, eyeing him over the top of her glasses.

"Sorry. Old habits die hard, I guess." He shrugged.

"I've called you in here for two reasons," Mrs. Peters said. "First, I was wondering how Alex is acclimating to her new school in—where is it again? Vermont?"

Conner gulped and his eyes grew very big. "Oh!" he said. Sometimes he forgot about the lie his family had told the school about his sister. "She's doing *great*! Never been happier!"

Mrs. Peters bit her lip and nodded, almost disappointed to hear this. "That's wonderful, good for her," she said. "Although sometimes I selfishly wish she would move back and be one of our students again. Your mother was telling me all about the educational programs they offer up there, though, so I'm sure she is enjoying them."

"She sure is!" Conner said, and looked to his left to avoid eye contact. "And Alex has always *loved* trees… and maple syrup… so Vermont suits her."

"I see," Mrs. Peters said, squinting. "And she's staying with your grandmother? Is that correct?"

"Yes, she's still with my grandma… who also loves trees and maple syrup. It's a family trait, I guess," Conner said, and then looked to the right. He panicked for a second when he couldn't remember which direction people tended to look in when they were lying—he had seen a special about it on TV.

"Then give her my warmest regards and please tell her to visit the next time she's in town," Mrs. Peters said.

"I will!" Conner said, relieved to be changing the subject.

"Now, on to the second reason I called you in today." Mrs. Peters sat up extra straight in her seat and slid a pamphlet across her desk. "I have just heard exciting news from an old colleague of mine who teaches English in Frankfurt, Germany. Apparently the University of Berlin has uncovered a time capsule that belonged to the Brothers Grimm. I'm assuming you

remember who they are from my lessons in the sixth grade."

"Are you kidding? My grandma knew them!" Conner said.

"Excuse me?"

Conner just stared at her for a moment, mortified by his carelessness. "I mean… yeah, of course I remember," Conner tried to cover. "They're the fairy-tale guys, right? My grandma used to read their stories to us."

"Indeed," Mrs. Peters said with a smile—she had grown so used to Conner's strange outbursts that she didn't even question this one for a second. "And according to the University of Berlin, three brand-new fairy tales were discovered in the capsule!"

"That's amazing!" Conner was genuinely excited to hear this and knew his sister would be thrilled, too.

"I agree," Mrs. Peters said. "And even better, the University of Berlin is planning a big event to reveal the stories. They're going to read them to the public for the first time this coming September, three weeks into next school year, at St. Matthäus-Kirchhof cemetery, where the Brothers Grimm are buried."

"All great things!" Conner said. "So what does this have to do with me?"

"Well, since you've become a bit of a *Grimm* yourself—"

Conner awkwardly laughed and looked back to his left. She had no idea how close to home this compliment was.

"I thought you'd be interested in the trip I'm planning." Mrs. Peters slid the pamphlet even closer to Conner. "I've decided to invite a few select students such as yourself—students who have proven to be passionate about writing and storytelling—to venture with me to Berlin and be among the crowd that hears the stories for the first time."

Conner picked up the pamphlet and stared down at it with an open mouth. "That sounds *awesome*!" He flipped it open and looked at all the attractions the city of Berlin had to offer. "Could we check out these nightclubs, too?"

"Unfortunately, missing more than a week of school for any trip is frowned upon by the school district. So no *nightclubs*, I'm afraid. We'll only be there for three days, but I thought this might be an opportunity you wouldn't want to miss," Mrs. Peters said with a confident smile. "I feel like a little piece of history is waiting for us."

Conner's smile faded when his eyes fell to the bottom of the pamphlet. He saw how much this trip would cost.

"Eek, this is a *pricey* educational opportunity," Conner said.

"Travel is never cheap, I'm afraid," Mrs. Peters said. "But there are many school fund-raisers I can get you information about—"

"Oh wait! I keep forgetting my mom just married a doctor! We're not poor anymore!" Conner said, and his smile returned. "But wait, does that mean *I'm* still poor? I'll have to ask them. There's so much to this stepson thing I haven't figured out yet."

Mrs. Peters raised her eyebrows and blinked twice, not sure what to tell him. "That's a conversation you'll have to have with them, but my office phone number is on the bottom of that pamphlet if you need help convincing them," she said with a quick wink.

"Thanks, Mrs. Peters!" Conner said. "Who else have you asked?"

"Only a handful of students," Mrs. Peters said. "I've learned the hard way that bringing more than six students to one chaperone on a trip can lead to a scene out of *Lord of the Flies*."

"I understand," Conner said. He couldn't get the image out of his head of tribal sixth graders tying Mrs. Peters to a spit and roasting her over an open fire.

"But Bree Campbell has signed up," Mrs. Peters said. "I believe she's in Ms. York's English class with you?"

Conner could feel his heart rate rising. His cheeks went red and he pursed his lips to hide a smile. "Oh, good," he said softly while his inside voice was screaming, *"Oh my gosh, Bree Campbell is going to Germany! That's amazing! That's the best news ever!"*

"She's quite the talented writer herself. I can imagine the two of you getting along nicely," Mrs. Peters said, oblivious to Conner's increasing pulse. "I hope you'll be able to join us. You should head back to class now."

Conner nodded as he got to his feet, and continued nodding all the way back to his Biology class. He didn't understand why the room always seemed to get warmer every time he saw or heard someone mention Bree Campbell. He wasn't even sure how he felt about her—but for whatever reason, Conner always looked forward to seeing her around and really wanted her to *like him*.

He couldn't explain it no matter how much thought he gave it. But one

thing was certain: *Conner had to go to Germany!*

Telling his mom and stepdad after school went as well as Conner could have imagined.

“It’s a really great educational opportunity,” Conner stressed. “Germany is a really super-smart place with a lot of history, I think some kind of war happened there at some point—*can I go? Can I go?*”

Charlotte and Bob sat on the couch in front of him looking over the pamphlet. They both had just gotten home from working at the children’s hospital and hadn’t even had time to change out of their scrubs before they were attacked by a very enthusiastic Conner.

“This seems like a great trip,” Charlotte said. “Your dad would have been so excited to hear about the Brothers Grimm time capsule!”

“I know, I know! Which is why I need to go—so I can experience it for all of us! Please, can I go?” he asked, bouncing in little hops. Whenever Conner asked them for something he acted like a hyper Chihuahua.

They only hesitated for a second but Conner felt like it was an hour. “Oh, come on! Alex gets to live in another dimension but I can’t go on a school trip to Germany?”

“You can absolutely go,” Charlotte said.

“YES!” Conner threw both hands into the air.

“But you’ll have to pay for it,” Charlotte quickly added.

Conner’s hands instantly fell and his excitement deflated like a crashed hot air balloon. “I’m thirteen—I can’t afford a trip to Europe!”

“True, but ever since we moved into Bob’s house you’ve been getting an allowance for helping out around the house and your fourteenth birthday will be here before you know it,” Charlotte said as she did the math in her head. “If you add those together with a little fund-raising at school, you’ll be able to afford—”

“Half of it,” Conner said. He had already done every possible math equation in relation to any parental scenario he thought they might throw his way. “So I’ll be able to get there but I won’t be able to come back.”

Bob looked down at the pamphlet and shrugged. “Charlotte, what if we met him halfway? This is a really great opportunity. Besides, he’s always been such a great kid, it couldn’t hurt to treat him a little.”

“Thanks, Bob! *Mom, listen to your husband!*” Conner said, and gestured toward him like he was directing a plane into a terminal.

Charlotte humored the idea for a moment. “That’s fine by me,” she said. “If you earn half and show us that this trip is something you really want, we’ll give you the other half. Do we have a deal?”

Conner wiggled from all the excitement building up inside of him. *“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”* he said, and shook both their hands. *“Pleasure doing business with you!”*

And so, after four months of saving his allowance, birthday money, and taking part in school fund-raisers selling candy, baked goods, and hideous pottery (which Charlotte and Bob bought most of), Conner had earned his half of the trip and was ready for Germany.

At the beginning of the week leading up to his departure, when Conner should have started packing, Bob walked into his bedroom with another surprise. He plopped a very old and dusty suitcase onto his stepson’s bed. It was brown and covered in stickers of famous locations, and made Conner’s room smell like feet.

Bob placed his hands on his hips and proudly looked down at the suitcase. “There it is!” Bob said.

“There *what* is?” Conner said. “Is that a coffin?”

“No, it’s the suitcase I used during my own Euro trip after college.” Bob gently petted the side of it like it was an old dog. “We’ve had some pretty good times together—covered a lot of ground! I thought you could use it for Germany.”

Conner couldn’t imagine taking it overseas—he was shocked the suitcase wasn’t instantly decaying like a mummy exposed to the elements after thousands of years. “I don’t know what to say, Bob,” he said, hiding his reservations under a fake smile. He couldn’t refuse it after Bob had helped make the trip happen.

“No need to thank me,” Bob said, although a thank-you was the furthest thing from Conner’s mind. “Just do me a favor and get a sticker from Berlin for her.”

“It’s a *she*?”

“Oh, yes, her name is Betsy,” Bob said as he headed out of his stepson’s room. “Enjoy her! Oh, almost forgot, her left buckle needs a good push to lock. Just put your back into it and you’ll be fine.”

At the end of the week, Conner discovered exactly what Bob was talking about as he struggled to shut it with the new addition of pants. After three

good pushes that almost threw out his back, he surrendered to Betsy.

“All right, maybe just six pairs of socks, four T-shirts, five pairs of underwear, two sweaters, pajamas, my lucky poker chip, a toothbrush, and *one* lucky rock will be enough,” Conner said. He removed the excess items from the suitcase and finished packing.

He was overdue for bed but Conner wanted to stay awake for a little while longer. He wanted to feel the excitement as long as he could. Thinking about the trip to Germany had been a great way for Conner to ignore the other thoughts he had been having lately. As he looked around his bedroom and listened to the absolute silence of the house, Conner couldn’t fight off the loneliness he had been suppressing. Something was missing from his life… *His sister.*

Conner opened his bedroom window to break the silence around him. Sycamore Drive was just as quiet as the house and did little to comfort him. He gazed up at the stars in the night sky. He wondered if Alex could see the same stars from wherever she was. Perhaps the Land of Stories was one of the stars he was looking at but it hadn’t been discovered yet. Wouldn’t that be an uplifting discovery? That he and his sister were only separated by light-years and not dimensions?

When Conner couldn’t stand the solitude anymore, he asked himself, “I wonder if she’s awake?”

Conner snuck down the stairs and into the family room. A large golden mirror hung there, on a wall it had all to itself. It was the mirror their grandmother had given them the last time they were together—it was the single object that allowed the twins to communicate between worlds.

He touched the golden frame and it started to shimmer and glow. It would glow for a few moments until Alex appeared in the mirror or return to its normal shade if she didn’t—and tonight she didn’t.

“She must be busy,” Conner said quietly to himself. “She’s always so busy.”

When he first arrived home from his last adventure in the fairy-tale world, Conner talked to his sister in the mirror every day for a couple of hours. She told him all about the lessons their grandmother was teaching her and the magic she was learning to use. He told her about his days at school and everything he had been taught, but her stories were always much more interesting.

Unfortunately, as Alex became more and more involved with the fairy-tale world, the twins' daily conversations happened less and less often. Sometimes more than a week passed before they spoke. Sometimes Conner wondered if Alex even needed him anymore. He had always known that one day they would grow up and lead separate lives—he just never imagined it would happen so soon.

Conner touched the mirror again and waited, hoping his sister would arrive. He didn't want to leave for Germany before having a chance to talk to her.

"I guess I'll have to tell her about it when I get back," Conner said, and headed to bed.

Just as he reached the stairs, he heard a small voice behind him say, "Conner? Are you there?"

Conner ran back to the mirror and his heart jumped. His sister was standing in the mirror before him. She wore a headband made of white carnations and a sparkling dress the same color as the sky. She seemed cheerful but Conner could tell she was very tired.

"Hi, Alex! How are you?" he asked.

"I'm great," Alex said with a big smile. He could tell she was just as excited to see him as he was to see her. "You're up late."

"I couldn't sleep," Conner said. "Too excited, I guess."

Alex scrunched her forehead. "Excited about what?" Before Conner could say anything, Alex had answered her own question. "Oh, you're leaving for Germany tomorrow, aren't you?!"

"Yes," Conner said. "More like later today. It's super late here."

"I completely forgot! I'm so sorry!" Alex said, disappointed in herself for letting it slip her mind.

"No worries," Conner said. He couldn't care in the slightest, he was just happy to see her.

"I've been so busy with magic lessons and preparing for this silly Fairy Inaugural Ball," Alex said. She rubbed her eyes. "I even forgot about our birthday! Isn't that crazy? Grandma and Mother Goose made a cake and I had to ask them what it was for!"

It was Conner's turn to scrunch his forehead. "Fairy Inaugural Ball? What is that?"

"It's this big party the Fairy Council is throwing to celebrate me joining

the Fairy Council," Alex said, as if it were just any old fact.

"That's amazing, Alex!" Conner said. "You're joining the Fairy Council already? You must be the youngest fairy that's ever joined!"

A proud and eager smile grew on her face. "Yes," she said. "Grandma thinks I'm ready. I'm not sure I agree with her, though; I still have so much to learn—"

"You know how protective Grandma is. She would protect the ocean from a raindrop," Conner said. "If she thinks you're ready then you must be!"

"I suppose," Alex said, still very unsure of herself. "It's just a lot of responsibility. Being part of the council means I'm automatically part of the Happily Ever After Assembly—which means having to give my input on so many decisions—which means so many people and creatures will look up to me for guidance—"

"There wouldn't still be a Happily Ever After Assembly if it wasn't for you," Conner reminded her. "That whole world is in your debt forever after defeating the Enchantress. I wouldn't worry."

Alex looked into his eyes and smiled. "Thanks, Conner." His reassurance always meant more to her than anyone else's.

"How is Grandma, by the way?" Conner asked.

"She's good," Alex said. "She misses you and Mom terribly—almost as much as I do. She's taught me so much over the past couple months. Really, Conner, you would be so impressed with some of the things I can do now."

Conner laughed. "Alex, I've been impressed by you since the womb. I'm sure your part of the uterus was much neater and more organized than mine."

Alex laughed out loud against her will—she missed her brother's sense of humor but she still didn't want to encourage it. "Really, Conner? A uterus joke? Come on. You're lucky Mom isn't awake to hear you," she said. "Is Mom doing all right? She's always very happy when she talks to me but we both know what a great front she can put up."

Conner nodded. "She's doing good, actually. She misses you but I've only caught her crying over an old photo of us together once or twice since we got back. Bob makes her really happy. I had almost forgotten what it was like to see her so happy all the time—it's like Dad is around again."

"That's great to hear," Alex said. "Dad would have been so excited

about your Germany trip. He'd probably be going with you if he was still alive—I wish I could go."

Conner looked at the clock. "Speaking of which, I better get to bed soon. I leave for the airport in, like, three hours."

Alex's face fell. "Aw, that's too bad. I've missed you so much—it's been great to catch up," she said. "I've just been so busy. Sometimes a whole week will pass and I'll feel like it was only a day or two."

"You're still happy, though, right?" He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. He would know if she was lying to him.

"Um…" Alex thought about all her lessons, all her tasks, and despite how overwhelmed and tired she was, she told him the truth. "Honestly… *I've never been happier!* I get up every morning with a smile on my face because living here is like waking up to a dream that never ends!"

The twins shared a smile, each knowing this was the truth. As hard as it was to be without her, Conner knew Alex was where she belonged and was having the time of her life.

"I wish there was a way I could take you to Germany with me," Conner said.

"Me too!" Alex said. "But I doubt there's a story the Brothers Grimm wrote that we haven't heard from Grandma or Dad or—*wait a second…*" Her eyes fell to the bottom of the mirror. "Is the right side of your mirror's frame loose?"

Conner inspected the corner of his mirror. "Nope—but wait, I think the left side is."

"Can you gently pull it back and uncover the corner of the glass?" Alex asked as she did the same on her side.

"Check!" Conner said.

"Oh, good!" Alex said. "Now, can you gently chip off a piece without cracking—"

Clink! Conner held up a piece of glass bigger than the palm of his hand. "Like this?"

Clink! Alex broke off a piece of her own mirror—it was a smaller and neater piece than her brother's but neither commented on that.

"Perfect! Now look into it!" Alex looked down into hers.

Conner looked into the small piece of mirror in his hand and saw his sister's face staring up at him. "Amazing!" he said with a laugh. "Now I can

keep you in my pocket the whole time! It's like video chat!"

"Terrific!" Alex said. "I've always wanted to see Europe! Now go get some rest; you don't want to be exhausted before you get to Germany."

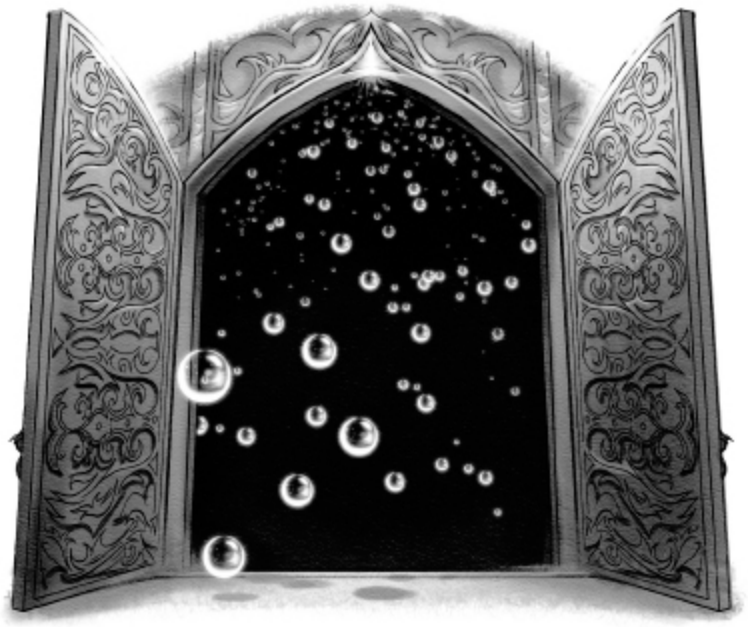
"Okay. Good night, Alex," Conner said. "I'll call you—or, um, *reflect you* rather—as soon as I get off the plane!"

"I'll look forward to it," Alex said, so pleased she would be a part of his trip. "I love you, Conner!"

"I love you, too, Alex," Conner said. And with that, the twins faded from each other's mirrors and returned to their separate lives.

Conner climbed the stairs and placed his piece of mirror gently into his sticker-covered suitcase. He lay in bed and closed his eyes tightly but couldn't fall asleep—seeing his sister had rejuvenated him completely, causing all the excitement about the following day to come rushing back.

He laughed at himself as he lay there. "I've ridden a magical goose, climbed a giant beanstalk, swum to an enchanted underwater cave on a sea turtle's back, and sailed on a flying ship across the skies of another dimension.…," Conner listed to himself. "But I'm excited about *getting on a plane tomorrow*! Oh, brother…"



Chapter Two

THE HALL OF DREAMS

Alex woke up the next day wearing a big smile. She had woken up with a smile every day since she began living in the Land of Stories, but her smile was especially big today because she had talked to her brother the night before. And although her new home had brought her huge amounts of happiness, spending time with her family made her feel better.

The Fairy Palace was the most beautiful place Alex had ever lived. She marveled at its beautiful golden pillars, archways, staircases, towers, and vast tropical gardens. However, one downside was that there were very few walls and ceilings in the Fairy Palace—it was always so pleasant outside the fairies had no need for them. So every morning when the sun rose over the Fairy Kingdom, Alex had no choice but to rise with it.

Luckily she had been able to enchant a magnolia tree to grow its branches and blossoms around her room like drapes. This gave her an extra few minutes of rest each morning before she forced herself out of bed and started her day. Other than the enchanted drapes, Alex kept her chambers quite simple. She had a large comfy bed with white rose-petal sheets, a few shelves filled to over-capacity with her favorite books, and a small wardrobe in the corner, which was practically unused thanks to a few magical tricks her grandmother had taught her.

Alex stepped out of bed, picked up her crystal wand from her nightstand, and waved it around her body. Her plain nightgown was instantly turned into a long, sparkling dress the color of the sky and a headband of white carnations appeared on her head—it was her standard fairy uniform and resembled her grandmother's.

"Good morning, Mom, Conner, and Bob," Alex said to a framed photo on her nightstand. "Good morning, Dad," she said to another framed photo, this one of her late father.

Alex took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "All right, three wishes by noon, three wishes by noon," she said to herself. "You can do this, you can

do this.”

Every day at noon Alex met her grandma in her grandma’s chambers for a new lesson. Sometimes the lessons were magical, sometimes historical, sometimes philosophical, but whatever it was, the lesson was always highly enjoyable.

And although it wasn’t expected, Alex had recently taken it upon herself to grant at least three wishes every day to the villagers nearby using the little magic she knew. It was very ambitious of the fourteen-year-old fairy-in-training, but Alex didn’t feel like herself unless she was overachieving. Alex also found that the busier she kept, the less homesick she felt—and the less she thought about her home in the Otherworld, the better her training went.

She briskly walked out of her chambers, through the palace, and down its front steps. The shimmering golden walls and floor had taken some getting used to but they didn’t make her nearly as dizzy as they had the first week she lived in the palace.

Alex passed Rosette, who was trimming a luscious rose garden just outside the palace. The roses and thorns were as big as her head.

“Good morning, Rosette!” Alex said.

“Good morning, dear!” Rosette waved at her as she walked by. “Another early morning, I see?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Alex said. “Three wishes by noon, that’s my daily goal! I haven’t missed a day in two months!”

“Good for you, dear! Keep up the good work!”

Alex continued through the gardens until loud snoring to her left startled her. She looked at the ground and saw Mother Goose sleeping against a large boulder, clutching a silver flask. Lester was passed out beside her—obviously the two had had a late night in the gardens.

“Good morning, Mother Goose!” Alex said loudly enough to wake them both.

Mother Goose snorted as she came to life. “Is it?” she said with one eye open. Lester yawned and stretched his long neck.

“Did you sleep outside all night?” Alex asked.

“Well, the last thing I remember was taking a walk with Lester after dinner and we stopped to sit for a moment,” Mother Goose said. “It looks like we’ve been here ever since. *Lester, you mattress filler! You were*

supposed to wake me up! I'm getting a bad reputation."

Lester rolled his eyes as if to say, "That ship has sailed."

"Why do we have to live in a *morning* kingdom?" Mother Goose said to the goose. "I swear I'm going to move to the Eastern Kingdom. At least people know how to sleep there!" Mother Goose climbed on top of Lester and took his reins, and together they flew toward the Fairy Palace.

Alex chuckled as she watched them fly away. Then she reminded herself of her schedule and proceeded with her walk. She reached the edge of the gardens and found herself in a large meadow.

"Cornelius!" Alex called out. She smacked the side of her leg loudly. "Here, boy! Where are you? Cornelius?"

Across the meadow, sipping from a stream, was a unicorn—but he was unlike any other unicorn in the kingdom. Cornelius was frumpy with a big tummy that swung underneath him when he walked. A silver horn grew out of his head but had broken in half during an accident when he was a baby.

"There you are, Cornelius!" Alex said.

Cornelius was glad to see her and trotted over so she could pet his large nose.

"Good morning, boy." Alex sensed something off about her horned friend today. He didn't have as much of a bounce in his step. "What's wrong, Cornelius? You seem sad."

Cornelius lowered his massive head and looked gloomily across the stream. Alex looked, too, and saw a herd of magnificent unicorns in the distance. Each was more beautiful than the next, with their long, lean bodies and perfect horns that glistened in the sunlight.

"Oh, Cornelius," Alex said, and stroked his mane. "You've got to stop comparing yourself to the other unicorns."

Cornelius nodded but Alex could see the self-consciousness in his eyes. He was never good at keeping any emotion to himself—he wore his heart on his hoof.

"Do you know why I chose you to be *my* unicorn, Cornelius?" she asked him.

The troubled unicorn opened his lips and showed off his large pearly white teeth.

"Yes, I know you have a good smile, but that's not the only reason," Alex said.

Cornelius stood on his back legs and moved his front legs in tiny circles.

“Yes, you’re a good dancer, too, but those aren’t what I’m talking about,” Alex said. “I chose you because you are different from all the other unicorns in the Fairy Kingdom. Your horn may be broken and small, but your heart is big and strong.”

Cornelius exhaled a gust of air and turned the other way. Alex had made him blush, the pink showing through his white hide.

“Are you ready to help me grant some wishes today?” Alex asked him. He neighed excitedly. “Good, then let’s get going!” Cornelius bent down and Alex hopped aboard his back. She waved her wand over his head and whispered into his ear, “*Take us to someone who needs us, Cornelius.*”

Cornelius’s broken horn began to glow, his head jerked northwest, and he started galloping at full speed to wherever it was the magic was leading him. Unicorns ran much faster than normal horses and Alex had to hold on to her headband as they went.

They zoomed through the trees, over a river and two streams, and eventually found a path that led them into the Charming Kingdom. A small and simple village came into view in the distance and Cornelius slowed down. He took Alex into the heart of the village—his horn was guiding him like a hound’s nose. Many of the villagers stopped in their tracks as Alex and the unicorn strode by them.

“Hello, good people of the Charming Kingdom!” Alex said. She awkwardly waved at them. “Don’t mind us, we’re just granting wishes!”

The villagers weren’t as excited as she was hoping they’d be, and went back to their daily errands. Cornelius came to a halt right in front of a tiny cottage with stick walls and a hay roof.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Alex asked. Cornelius nodded confidently and his horn stopped glowing.

Alex hopped down from her unicorn and walked to the door. She knocked lightly but the sticks broke under her knuckles, leaving a small hole in the door.

“Oh dear,” Alex said. She wasn’t off to a good start.

“Who’s there?” a faint voice asked from behind the door. Alex looked through the hole she had just made and saw a pair of eyes staring out at her.

“Hello,” Alex said. “My name is Alex and I’m a fairy! Well—technically I’m a fairy-in-training—but I’ve come here today to grant

wishes. My unicorn has led me to this location. Does someone inside this cottage have a wish they'd like granted?"

The wrinkled eyes looked her up and down. Alex knew her introduction was as much of a work in progress as her magic, but to her surprise, the door opened and an elderly woman appeared before her.

"Come in," the woman said, although she didn't seem thrilled to have company.

"Thank you," Alex said. She took a step inside and looked around the small home. It was dirty and dim, as frail on the inside as it was on the outside. "You have a lovely home," Alex said politely. "What can I help you with?"

"These are my granddaughters. I'm assuming you've come to help them," the woman said. Had she not addressed them, Alex wouldn't even have seen the identical triplet girls standing against the wall. They were so dirty they blended into the rest of the house.

"Nice to meet you," Alex said but they wouldn't shake her hand.

"They need nice clothes for school," the woman said. She sat down at a table covered in thread and fabric. "We can't afford to buy new dresses so I tried making them myself, but my hands aren't what they used to be." She raised two hands that shook with arthritis.

"Say no more!" Alex said. "I'll turn their tattered clothes into beautiful dresses they'll be proud to wear at school!"

The triplets looked at one another with wide eyes—*could she actually do it?* Alex was asking herself the same question. She raised her wand and flicked it at each of the girls like she was conducting a symphony. One by one, a bright sparkly light circled each girl, transforming her dirty clothes into a vibrant pink dress with a white collar.

The girls looked down at their new dresses in total silence. Alex figured they were shocked from witnessing magic—but she was very wrong.

"Gross, they're pink!" one of the girls said.

"I hate pink!" another said.

"Can you make them another color?" the third asked.

Alex was taken aback by their ungrateful remarks. She looked at their grandmother, expecting them to be reprimanded.

"Don't look at me. You never asked them what color they wanted," the woman said.

“Oh, sorry! My mistake,” Alex said. She raised her wand and flicked it three more times at the girls, transforming the dresses into yellow, purple, and blue.

“Better?” Alex asked.

“I don’t like my collar,” one of the girls said.

“I want green,” another said.

“I liked the pink one better,” the third said.

Alex’s nostrils flared and she bit her tongue. “Fine,” she said with a tight jaw. She flicked her wand to grant their requests. “Are we all happy?”

“Sure,” one of the girls said unenthusiastically.

“It’s *fine*,” another said.

“Can I have my old clothes back?” the third said.

Alex was floored. She wanted to tell them that beggars can’t be choosers, but as a fairy she couldn’t bring herself to say it. After all, she wasn’t helping them because they were poor; she was helping them because that’s what she was supposed to do.

“Girls, I want you to thank the nice fairy lady for the new dresses even though she doesn’t know what she’s doing,” the old woman said.

The triplets frowned. “Thank you,” they said in unison, not meaning a word of it.

“You’re welcome,” Alex said, not meaning it, either. “Enjoy school.”

She left the house in a huff and found Cornelius nibbling on a piece of the roof. She convinced herself that even though her first deed of the day had been unappreciated, it had still been a good one. Alex jumped on Cornelius’s back and waved her wand over him again.

“One wish down, two more to go,” she said. “Take us to our next stop, Cornelius!”

The unicorn’s horn glowed again and he began to run in another direction. Soon they arrived just outside an even smaller village in the northern part of the Charming Kingdom. Cornelius took Alex straight up a hill and dropped her off beside a well where two village children stood staring down into it.

Alex smiled and struck a pose for them with her wand raised. “Hello, children!” she said, but they continued staring down the well. Alex cleared her throat. “How can I help you? Did you drop something down there?”

The children finally looked up at her, but their subdued expressions

didn’t change.

“No,” the boy said. “It’s been dried up for a while.”

“Our mom sends us here every day with a pail, hoping there’ll be water,” the girl said. “But every day we return with nothing.”

Alex was happy to hear of their misfortune. “I can help you with that!” she said, feeling useful.

“How?” the boy asked.

“Are you going to build us another well?” the girl asked.

“No, I’m a fairy!” Alex said, a bit disheartened that she had to tell them. She was certain her grandmother never had to tell people who *she* was. “I can cast a magic spell to make the water come back.”

The village children both raised an eyebrow at her, not buying it.

“If you’re a fairy, then where are your wings?” the boy asked.

“Not all of us have wings,” Alex said. “We come in all shapes, sizes, and variations.”

The children cocked their heads and stared at Cornelius behind her. “Is that a unicorn?” the boy asked.

“It sure is! He’s the reason I’m here—he brought me to this spot knowing I could be of service,” Alex explained. Cornelius lifted his head proudly, showing off for the children, but they were a tough crowd.

“Why is he so fat?” the boy asked.

“Is his horn broken?” the girl asked.

Cornelius lowered his head and looked at the ground sadly.

“He broke his horn when he was a baby and he eats his feelings, okay?” Alex quickly told them. “Now do you want me to fix your well or not?”

The village children shrugged. “I suppose,” the boy said. “It can’t get any worse.”

Alex was so glad to finally get to the point. She instructed the children to stand a few feet behind her. She peeked inside the well and saw nothing but dirt at the end of a very long drop. She raised her crystal wand and swung it toward the well. The sound of water echoed up the well as the bottom of it was magically filled. The village children jumped and clapped for joy.

“You fixed our well!” the boy said happily.

“You *are* a fairy after all!” the girl said.

“Let’s take you back to the village so they can reward you!” the boy

said.

Alex shrugged and her cheeks went a little rosy. She was very pleased to be appreciated. “No need to reward me,” she said. “Everything I do is for the greater good and I never expect—”

Alex stopped talking and the village children became very still. The ground underneath their feet shook and a loud whistling sound came from the well as it filled with more and more water rushing to the top.

“Oh no,” Alex peeped. She and the children and Cornelius slowly backed away. A massive geyser shot out of the well and into the sky like an erupting volcano.

“I was wrong!” the boy shouted. *“This is worse! This is worse!”*

“Run for your life!” the girl yelled.

The children ran down the hill and back to their village as fast as they could, screaming their heads off. Villagers dashed outside their homes and shops to see what all the fuss was about—they couldn’t believe their eyes. Water from the geyser rained down on the village, drenching everyone and everything.

Alex and Cornelius were getting drenched, too. “Cornelius! Sit on the well! Plug it up until I can think of something to do!” she said. The unicorn looked at her like she was out of her mind. *“Please?”* Alex pleaded.

Cornelius carefully went to the well. His hooves were messy from all the fresh mud the geyser was creating. He lifted his tail and sat right on the well, plugging it up and stopping the geyser. It was a degrading experience for him but it proved to be useful. The village cheered from below, but it only lasted a moment. The water built up inside the well and shot the unicorn straight into the air. He landed on the muddy hill and slid toward the village like an avalanche. All the villagers ran back into their homes and shops to avoid him.

Cornelius crashed into the side of a barn. He was covered in so much mud he looked like Black Beauty.

“Dry!” Alex yelled, and pointed her wand at the well. “Dry up, I said! *Dry! Dry! Dry!*”

Suddenly a huge ball of fire erupted from the tip of Alex’s wand and hit the well, blasting half of it into pieces. Thankfully, the water pressure diminished and the geyser died down. The well was broken but full of water —and the village was covered in it, too.

“I fixed it!” Alex happily called down to the village below. The villagers peeked out from their homes and stared up at her, each soaked, dripping, and furious. “The good news is you have water again.” Alex tried to laugh it off, but no one joined her.

The muddy unicorn joined the young fairy at the top of the hill. “Okay, Cornelius, let’s get out of here.”

She climbed on his back and they took off—not in the direction of their next stop but just as far away from the soaked village as they could get for the moment. They found a tiny stream in the woods and cleaned themselves up. Cornelius had a hard time looking at his reflection in the water; he was fat, broken, *and* dirty.

“Would you like me to use my wand to make you clean again?” Alex asked Cornelius. The unicorn shook his head—he didn’t want what had happened to the well to happen to him. “Okay, then,” said Alex, “let’s move on to our final stop.”

It was a couple hours till noon and Cornelius’s magic horn steered them to the southwest corner of the Eastern Kingdom. A farm appeared in the distance that Alex thought she recognized.

“Haven’t we been here before?” Alex asked Cornelius, but he was certain his horn was leading them to the right place. Up ahead Alex saw a farmer building a fence around his vegetable garden and figured he was the man they were looking for.

“Excuse me? Do you need any help?” she asked the farmer.

The farmer wiped the sweat off his brow and looked over his shoulder at her. He instantly got to his feet and waved her away like she was a wild animal he didn’t want to deal with.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” the farmer said. “I don’t want any trouble, lady!”

Alex was insulted. What about her could possibly make him believe she was bringing trouble?

“Sir, I’m not trying to cause any harm,” Alex assured him. “I’m a fairy. I’m here to help.”

The farmer placed his hands on his hips and squinted at her. “That’s what you said the last time,” he said.

“The *last time*?” Alex asked. “So I’ve been here before?”

The farmer regretfully nodded. “Yes, you *helped* me put a fence around my yard to keep out the rabbits and deer,” he informed her.

Alex pressed her index finger to her mouth as she recalled. “Oh, I remember you! You’re Farmer Robins!” she said. “But what happened to the fence I gave you?”

Alex heard a door shut. She looked up and saw Farmer Robins’s son coming out from their house—Alex didn’t have any trouble remembering him. He was tall and strong, no more than a year older than her, had wispy hair that covered his face, and in Alex’s opinion, was very handsome.

“The animals ate your fence,” the farmer’s son said with a brash smile. “It was made of vines and leaves—it was fun to watch you make it magically grow out of the ground but it wasn’t ideal for keeping out herbivores.”

“Don’t you have a table to build?” Farmer Robins asked his son.

“I’m on a break,” the son said. Clearly he wanted to stick around now that Alex was there. She tried her best not to look him directly in the eyes—she could feel herself blushing when she did.

“Well, why didn’t you tell me the fence wouldn’t work the last time I was here?” she asked the farmer.

“You didn’t give us much of a chance,” the farmer’s son answered for him. “You just sort of waved your wand and then left, insisting there was no need to thank you.”

Alex shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Gosh, no good deed goes unpunished,” she said to herself. “Well, then I insist you let me make it up to you!” Alex raised her wand; she was just about to make a new fence appear when the farmer blocked her.

“Young lady,” Farmer Robins said rudely, “I’ve got a full day of chores ahead of me and building this fence is just the beginning. The best thing you can do is leave us alone and stop wasting our time.”

“That’s silly,” Alex tried to argue. “All I have to do is wave my wand and the fence will be done—”

“I said *LEAVE!*” Farmer Robins yelled, losing his patience with her. “We don’t *want* your help and we don’t *need* it. I know you people solve everything with just a flick of your wrist, but people like us know how to take care of ourselves. So please go turn a maid into a princess somewhere before I do or say something I’ll regret.”

Alex’s mouth dropped open. She wasn’t going to let someone speak to her like that, especially after the awful morning she had been having.

Farmer Robins had picked the wrong day to mess with this fairy.

"No!" Alex yelled back at the farmer.

"What?" the farmer said.

"No, I will not *leave*," Alex said.

The farmer's son perked up—this was going to be interesting.

"I'm really sorry for going out of my way to help you but you aren't the only one with a job, buddy," Alex said. She stepped closer to Farmer Robins. "The fact is, you need my help whether you want it or not, and that's why I'm here! That's why my unicorn brought me! So swallow your pride, step back, and get out of my way because I'm not leaving until this fence is built!"

Farmer Robins looked genuinely terrified of Alex. His son bit his fist and choked on the laughter building up inside of him. Alex set her wand on the ground and rolled up her sleeves. She walked over to the farmer and reached for his hammer.

"What are you doing?" the farmer asked.

"Give me your hammer," Alex demanded. "I don't need magic to build this fence."

She yanked the hammer out of his hand, picked up a couple pieces of wood, and continued to build what the farmer had started. Farmer Robins and his son stood motionless and watched the young fairy work.

"If you two have so much work to do today, I suggest you get to it while I build this," she snapped with a dirty glare. They didn't argue. Farmer Robins went to work a few feet away, pulling carrots out of the ground, and his son went back inside the house to finish the table.

Alex built the fence at a very quick pace. Fueled by frustration, she had the whole thing done in just under two hours. She pounded the final nail into the last piece of wood and returned to her unicorn.

"I'm done!" she called to Farmer Robins. His son stepped back outside to see the completed fence—he was very impressed by the young fairy's craftsmanship. She retrieved her wand from the ground and jumped onto Cornelius's back.

"Have a nice day, gentlemen!" Alex said. "And by the way, *no need to thank me! BECAUSE I'M A FAIRY, IT'S MY JOB!*"

Alex and Cornelius galloped away, leaving the two stunned farmers in the dust behind them. It was a few minutes past noon by the time Alex

made it back to the Fairy Kingdom. She left Cornelius in the meadow at the edge of the gardens and hurried toward the Fairy Palace, not wanting to keep her grandmother waiting a minute longer.

“Oh come on now, they aren’t going to sting you!” said a perky voice in the garden. Tangerina was feeding acorns to a family of squirrels in a tree when Alex ran past her. The bees flying around Tangerina’s beehive were making the squirrels very apprehensive.

“Hi, Tangerina,” Alex said.

“Oh my goodness, what happened to you?” Tangerina asked when she saw Alex hurrying past her. Between fixing the well and building the fence, Alex had become filthy. “You look like you fell into a stream!”

“It’s a long story,” Alex said, trying to avoid getting wrapped up in an explanation.

“Did someone say stream?” an airy voice asked from across the garden. Skylene surfaced in the nearby pond. Her long, silky hair and gown were one with the water as she floated through it.

“Poor Alex has had a rough morning,” Tangerina said.

“Just trying to help as many people as I could before my noon lesson with Grandma,” Alex told her fairy counterparts.

“Don’t work too hard, Alex,” Skylene said. “You’ve got a big day coming up!” She floated through the pond and gently touched the surface with her finger, causing gorgeous white lilies to appear around her. “I’m getting a head start on the decorations. I’ve always loved a good fairy inauguration celebration. It’s an excuse for the kingdom to look its best!”

“I can’t wait for the Inaugural Ball! My bees are making me a brand-new honeycomb gown as we speak!” Tangerina said.

“How fancy is this Inaugural Ball?” Alex asked them, feeling a hurricane of anxiety forming inside her. “I thought it was just a simple ceremony. Do I have to dress up?”

Tangerina and Skylene exchanged the same worried look—as if she had asked them what the sun was.

“Sweetheart, the Fairy Inaugural Ball is how you’re introduced to society,” Skylene said. “You need to look how you want to be remembered.”

“Every fairy in the kingdom will be there,” Tangerina said. “And they’ll all be there to see you!”

Alex closed her eyes. “Oh great…,” she said, “as if joining the Fairy Council wasn’t enough, now I’ll have to worry about looking nice in front of the whole kingdom. Why does it seem like fairies always spare the details until the very last minute?”

“Not to worry, dear, you’ll look fine in whatever you choose,” Tangerina said.

“Yes, just don’t choose that,” Skylene said, and pointed to the dirty dress she was currently wearing.

Alex sighed quietly. She waved her wand over her body and her dress sparkled until it was like new again. “Well, good talk, girls! Thanks!” she said, and continued to the Fairy Palace.

Alex rushed up the golden front steps of the palace, down the main hall, and up a flight of stairs to the top floor, where her grandmother’s chambers were. They were some of the only parts of the palace that had four walls, so Alex had to knock.

“Come in, dear,” Alex heard her grandmother say, and she stepped inside. It didn’t matter how many times she had been there, her grandmother’s rooms always dazzled her.

To call the Fairy Godmother’s chambers anything but spectacular would be an understatement. The furniture was made of rosy-dusk clouds and floated around the room. Her bed was under the branches of a white willow tree with crystal leaves. Instead of a fire burning in the giant fireplace to one side of the room, bubbles emitted from it and filled the air. A chandelier made of a hundred perched doves floated above the center of the room, although there was no ceiling for it to hang from.

Every surface in the room was covered with the Fairy Godmother’s collectibles. Jewels given to her by monarchs from both worlds over time covered the mantel. A large table near the fireplace was covered with colorful bottles of potions and elixirs. A glass display case mounted to the wall contained the Fairy Godmother’s wand collection. A mini-library of books of spells, fantasy, and history covered the wall across from the fireplace.

But in front of all these valuables were countless family photos of Alex and Conner and their dad, crayon drawings they had done for her as kids, math and spelling tests they had received A’s on, and horrific macaroni creations the twins had made her for Grandparents’ Day. She hadn’t thrown

out anything the twins had ever given her.

In the back of the room, elevated on a platform, was the Fairy Godmother's desk, made entirely of glass—although Alex never saw her sitting behind it. She always found her standing by one of the four tall windows behind it that looked out to a breathtaking view of the Fairy Kingdom.

"Hello, Alex," Grandma said by one of the windows. She was in her trademark blue robes that sparkled like a starry sky.

"Sorry I'm late, Grandma," Alex said. "Things got a little carried away today when I was granting wishes."

"Oh?" Grandma asked. "Why is that?"

Alex sighed. "Sometimes I don't know if I should be a fairy," she confessed. "Don't get me wrong: I love magic and I love helping people. There are days I'll get up and feel so good about what I'm doing for people, and then others when I feel like I'm just screwing everything up. Some days I don't think I'm helping enough people, and then other days I don't think people even want my help. And when I don't feel confident, my magic suffers—it becomes so unpredictable. And when that happens I feel like I have no business being on the Fairy Council."

Alex sat on the steps of the platform and rubbed her tired eyes. Her grandmother walked over to her and gently stroked the top of her head.

"You're overexerting yourself, Alex," the Fairy Godmother told her granddaughter. "You're only one person. No matter how hard you try, you can't help *everyone*. And you're beginning to learn that some people can't be helped, not because they're helpless, but because they don't want to be helped."

Alex looked at the floor—this was a hard lesson to learn.

"I'm glad you brought this up," Grandma said. "There is something I wanted to show you. Follow me."

The Fairy Godmother helped her granddaughter to her feet and escorted her out of the room and down a very long hallway. They stopped at a large pair of doors in an impressive arched entryway. Alex had never seen these doors before.

"Where are we, Grandma?"

"*This*," Grandma began with a smile, "is the *Hall of Dreams*."

The Fairy Godmother pushed open the doors. Alex gasped and her eyes

grew to twice their size. The room inside was unlike anything she'd ever seen. It was a dark and endless space that seemed to stretch for miles in every direction. Bright orbs of all sizes floated around them. It was like the whole galaxy had been squeezed into the room in front of them.

They stepped inside and shut the doors behind them. Alex wasn't sure how they were standing since there was technically no floor.

"This room has been here since the beginning of fairies," Grandma said.

"What are they?" Alex asked as the orbs flew around her.

"They're *dreams*, each and every one of them," her grandma told her. "No matter how big or small the dream, a record of every *wish* or *want* can be found in this room."

"There are thousands—no, millions of them!" Alex said.

"Oh, yes, possibly more!" the Fairy Godmother said. "As you can see, even with all the fairies in the world, it would be impossible to make every dream come true. When you look inside them you can see what they are and who they belong to."

A medium-size orb floated directly into Alex's hand. She peered into it closely and could see a small girl wearing a paper crown inside.

"That little girl dreams of becoming a princess," Grandma said. "You'll find a lot of those in here. We tend to pay special attention to the ones more like *this*."

One of the largest orbs floated into her hand and they both looked into it. Inside the orb a sad little boy watched over his younger sister, who sat in a wooden wheelchair.

"This little boy would give anything just to see his sister walk again," Grandma said. "It's one of the larger orbs because it's one of the larger dreams—and it's easier to hold because it's selfless. I'm going to save it and see if there's anything I can do for them later." Grandma promptly placed the orb in a pocket of her robes.

"So *this* is how you find all the people you help?" Alex asked.

"Indeed," the Fairy Godmother said. "Much more efficient than unicorns, don't you agree?"

The two exchanged a smile. Alex tried to reach for another large orb, but it wouldn't stay in her hand.

"Why can't I grab that one?" Alex asked, afraid it was something to do with her.

“Because whoever that dream belongs to doesn’t want your help, and from the looks of it, they don’t even want you to know what their dream is,” Grandma said.

“That’s silly,” Alex said. “Why wouldn’t they want me to see it?”

“To know someone’s deepest desires is to risk knowing them more than they want to be known,” the Fairy Godmother said. “I’ve had to learn that lesson the hard way many times.”

Alex thought for a moment and stopped trying to grab the orb. “It must be so frustrating to see all these dreams and know you can’t make them all come true,” she said.

“When I was younger, perhaps,” the Fairy Godmother said. “But we should do what we can, and not torture ourselves over the things we can’t. It’s unfair and unrealistic to expect yourself to solve every problem in the world. Never forget that no matter how many dreams you find in here, there would be many more if it weren’t for people like us. Every wish granted by the magic from a fairy’s wand inspires a dozen more that will be achieved by the magic within people themselves. Take a look at that one.”

The Fairy Godmother gestured at an orb floating in front of them that slowly faded away until it disappeared.

“What happened to it?” Alex asked.

“The dream came true,” Grandma said. “And it had nothing to do with us. After years and years of being inspired by other dreamers, that person made their own dream come true and probably inspired countless others to do the same. We wouldn’t want to live in a world where no one believed in themselves enough to make their own dreams come true.”

A shy smile came to Alex’s face. “I think I get what you’re trying to teach me, Grandma.”

Grandma smiled back at her. “I’m glad to hear it.” A small orb landed in the Fairy Godmother’s hand but it instantly faded away.

“Whose was that?” Alex asked.

“Mine,” Grandma said. “Every lesson that you learn is a dream come true for me. And I have to say, you’re learning much faster than I ever did.”

Alex smiled again. Despite how frustrating her day had been, her grandmother made her feel like she was accomplishing her *own* dreams. She knew that somewhere in this room an orb that belonged to her had just disappeared.

“Now, aside from our lessons, I want you to relax for the rest of the week. You can’t help anyone if you don’t know how to help yourself first,” the Fairy Godmother instructed her.

“All right,” Alex reluctantly agreed. “Thank you for the lesson, Grandma.” She hugged her and left the Hall of Dreams. She didn’t know what to do with herself for the rest of the day—it’d been a while since she had allowed herself any free time.

Once her granddaughter left, the Fairy Godmother closed her eyes and tiny tears formed behind her lids. She had never thought it would be possible to be as proud of someone as she was of Alex. She knew that one day Alex would be an even better fairy godmother than she was.

And unfortunately, due to some changes the Fairy Godmother had recently felt inside herself, she knew that day was going to arrive much sooner than either of them wanted.…

Chapter Three

THE BOOK HUGGERS

Conner was having a whimsical dream. He was skipping through the German countryside in bright green lederhosen, merrily swinging a basket of freshly picked flowers. He yodeled happily as he skipped toward a picturesque village ahead of him. Everything was so peaceful and happy—he never wanted to leave. But suddenly, a screeching alarm sounded through the area—it was a familiar sound, one that he had heard many times before. Conner looked to the sky and saw the evil alien race from the television show he had watched the night before descend upon the village and begin attacking it!

The dream came to an abrupt stop when Conner realized the sound was coming from his alarm clock. He smacked it a couple times more than necessary to shut it off. He was so tired he didn't even feel alive. He felt like his head was filled with a giant cloud that made it difficult to keep his eyes open.

Even though he was glad he'd gotten to spend time with Alex the night before, he was seriously regretting his decision to stay up so late. He got dressed and dragged Betsy down the stairs one step at a time. Bob and Charlotte were waiting for him by the front door—they had always been *morning people*, a race Conner never understood.

"Ready, champ?" Bob asked, spinning his car keys in his hand.

Conner grunted something that sounded like yes. Charlotte had an early morning at the hospital and was already dressed for work. She put her arms around her son and hugged him tightly.

"Make good choices, Conner," she said. "But most important, have fun!"

"Mom, I can't go to Germany if you're still hugging me," Conner wheezed through her tight grip.

"I just need another minute," Charlotte said. "You're the only kid I've got left to hug."

Once his mother finally let go, Conner threw his suitcase into the back of Bob's car and they left the house. They stopped at a fast-food drive-in for a greasy breakfast, one they wouldn't have gotten away with if Charlotte

was with them, and headed to the airport. Bob happily reminisced about his own European adventures as he drove. Conner faded in and out of the conversation—the subtle bumps and vibrations of the car kept putting him to sleep. Eventually they arrived at the airport and Bob pulled up to the curbside.

“Before you get out, there’s something I wanted to give you,” Bob said in a very serious tone.

“It isn’t the birds-and-the-bees talk, is it?” Conner asked, fearing the worst. “Because I’ve already seen all the videos at school.”

“Um, no…,” Bob said. He paused for a moment, wondering if that was the talk he should have been giving him instead, but then proceeded as planned. “I got you something your mom doesn’t know about.”

Bob reached into his front pocket and pulled out a credit card. He handed it to his stepson and Conner was shocked to see “Conner Jonathan Bailey” written across the bottom.

“That’s my… my… *my name,*” Conner said. “You got me a *credit card,* Bob?!”

“I did,” Bob said. “The pin number is the year you were born. It’s only for emergencies and only for this trip, understand? As soon as you come home safe and sound I’m going to take it back. I know your mom is against things like this but I’d rather you were safe than sorry—so it’s our little secret, okay?”

Conner excitedly bobbed his head up and down. “Absolutely! Bob, you’re slowly becoming my favorite person ever! Thank you so much!”

Bob smiled and chuckled to himself. “Glad to hear it.” He patted Conner on the back. “You’re my family, Conner. I need to make sure you’ll be all right. Now go have an adventure—I mean, you know, one by normal standards. Try to avoid the evil enchantresses and talking animals as much as possible.”

Conner spotted Mrs. Peters standing outside the terminal entrance. She was surrounded by a group of four girls from school who had all just arrived as well. As excited as he was about the trip, Conner wasn’t looking forward to traveling with *these* girls.

“Don’t worry,” Conner reassured Bob. “The scariest thing on this trip is waiting for me over there.”

Conner gave Bob a hug, grabbed Betsy from out of the back, and waved

good-bye as Bob drove off. He joined Mrs. Peters and the group of girls by the entrance. All the girls looked as tired as Conner. Mrs. Peters, however, looked exactly the same as she always did, which furthered Conner's theory that she was a robot.

"Good morning, Mr. Bailey," Mrs. Peters said, perky as ever.

"Good morning, Mrs. Peters," Conner said. "Good morning, Mindy—Cindy—Lindy—Wendy."

None of the girls responded, and Conner hadn't expected them to. They hadn't said a word to Conner since the school year began. Instead, they would just stare daggers at him from afar—as if he had publicly humiliated them in the past and never apologized for it. Conner couldn't think of a reason they did this but he never spent too much thought on it. He knew girls tended to get very strange at their age—and these four were already some of the strangest girls he had ever met.

Mindy, Cindy, Lindy, and Wendy had been inseparable since the first grade when they were grouped together by their teacher for a rhyming project. Together they made up the Reading Club at school and spent every moment they could in the library. They would have reminded Conner of his sister had they not been so eccentric.

Mindy was the shortest, the loudest, and the self-appointed leader of their group. She wore her hair in pigtails every day as if she was contractually obligated to. Cindy was the youngest and to this day proudly told everyone that she had skipped kindergarten. She also had a mouthful of braces with enough metal to build a satellite. Lindy was African American and the tallest girl at school. She even towered over all her teachers. She stood a bit hunched over from all the time she spent looking down at people. Wendy was painfully shy and usually let the other girls do all the talking. She was Japanese and had very dark hair and the largest eyes Conner had ever seen on a human.

He had known for a while that the four girls were going on the trip and it had almost convinced him to stay home. But luckily, Bree was going, which somehow made the whole trip worthwhile.

"We're just waiting for Ms. Campbell to arrive and then we'll get checked in," Mrs. Peters said, looking up and down the curb. "You're the only boy on the trip, Mr. Bailey. Are you sure you can handle it?"

"Oh yeah," Conner said. "I'm used to it. My mom and sister used to talk

about all kinds of girl things in front of me… usually over dinner, too, which I never appreciated."

The girls exchanged dramatic eye rolls with one another as soon as Conner mentioned his sister. He couldn't figure out what their problem was.

"Oh, here comes Ms. Campbell," Mrs. Peters said.

Conner jerked his head in the direction she was looking and saw Bree Campbell walking toward them. The exhausting clouds filling his head instantly deflated. Just seeing her made Conner feel like he had drunk five energy drinks.

Bree Campbell was unlike any girl Conner had ever met. She was always very calm and cool, never raised her voice for anything, and never seemed to let anything or anyone affect her in any way. She had blonde hair with a streak of pink and blue in her bangs. She usually wore bracelets and wristbands by the dozen, always wore a purple beanie, and had an earbud plugged into one ear whenever she could.

"Good morning, Ms. Campbell," Mrs. Peters said.

"Good morning, everyone," Bree said with a yawn. She even *yawned* cooler than everyone else, Conner thought.

"Let's go inside and get checked in," Mrs. Peters instructed, and they followed her with their luggage. One by one they showed their passports to the lady behind the counter and checked in to their flight.

Conner was standing in line right behind Bree. He couldn't explain the anxiety she caused him. He was so excited to be near her, yet terrified at the same time.

She's just a girl, not a python, he said to himself over and over in his head. *Be cool. Don't try to be funny. Just act normal. And when you get back home you need to see a doctor about this.*

"Mindy, Cindy, Lindy, and Wendy are in row thirty-one, seats A, B, C, and D," Mrs. Peters said as she passed out their plane tickets. "And Conner and Bree are in row thirty-two, seats A and B."

Conner's heart was doing cartwheels. *I'm sitting next to Bree! I'm sitting next to Bree! Woo-hoo!* he thought. *But why does that seem like the best news of my life?*

He got a glimpse of Bree's passport photo—which was, to no surprise, far better than his—and Bree caught him staring at it. Conner had to think fast so he didn't seem like the creeper that he was.

“Your passport picture is much better than mine,” he said. “I got mine over the summer and made the mistake of asking if I was supposed to smile right as they took it.”

He flipped his passport open so she could get a glimpse of it.

“It kind of looks like you sneezed and it scared you,” Bree said blankly. There was no trace of judgment or mockery in her voice. It was a perfectly honest description.

“Would you like to check your bag, sir?” the lady at the counter asked. It took Conner a second to realize she was talking to him; no one had ever called him *sir* before.

“Oh, please! Take her!” Conner said and handed Betsy over to be tagged. The lady gave him a strange look, hearing that his suitcase had a gender. “I mean take *it.* Take *the suitcase.*”

Betsy was loaded onto the conveyor belt and slowly traveled farther and farther away from him. The next time he’d see her would be in Germany. Conner and the girls went through the security line and their group was boarding the plane within the hour.

The plane was massive. Conner couldn’t wrap his head around how something so big could get into the air. Even after witnessing all the magical things he had seen in the Land of Stories, it was still fascinating to him. They walked down the aisle and found their seats. Conner gulped when he realized how long he would have to spend in such a small area.

“Where is your seat, Mrs. Peters?” Mindy asked. All the seats around them were filling up fast.

“I’ll be in first class,” Mrs. Peters said. “But don’t worry; if any of you need me, just have a flight attendant notify me. I’ll be in row one, seat A. It’s going to be a long flight, so get comfortable.”

And with that said, Mrs. Peters promptly turned on her heel and pushed her way past the oncoming travelers to the front of the plane. Conner sat down in his seat by the window and Bree sat next to him. He stared at the back of the seat in front of him for a moment; he had no idea how to start a conversation with her.

“Are you okay by the window?” Conner asked her.

Bree looked confused. “But *you’re* by the window,” she said.

Conner wanted to smack his head against the stupid window—they weren’t off to a good start. “Oh, right, what I meant to ask was if you

wanted to sit by the window," he said. "I wouldn't mind switching seats."

"I'll be fine," Bree said. "I'm just going to read for most of the flight." She gestured to her bag and Conner saw it was full of thick murder-mystery novels. Bree kept getting cooler by the second.

"Great. Let me know if you change your mind," Conner said, and returned to staring at the seat in front of him until he thought of something else to say. "So, Mrs. Peters was telling me you like to write, too."

"Uh-huh." Bree nodded. "Short stories mostly. I read some of yours when I TA'd for Ms. York last year—they're cute. They remind me of classic fairy tales."

Conner couldn't believe his ears. "You've read *my* stories?"

"Yup," Bree said. "I liked them a lot—especially the one about the Curvy Tree and the Walking Fish. Those were very clever."

"Thanks," Conner said, and blushed a deep shade of red. Not only had she read them but she also *remembered* them. "Those were originally called the Curvy Giraffe and the Flying Frog, but I changed the titles to sound more… um… realistic. What kind of stories do you write?"

"I just finished one called 'Cemetery of the Undead,' " Bree said. "It's pretty self-explanatory."

Conner nodded a little too much to seem normal. "Sounds lovely."

He felt like an idiot talking about his fairy tales knowing that she wrote about things like cemeteries and zombies. How was he going to convince her he was cool when she was obviously the coolest person that ever lived?

"I've thought about changing up my genre," Conner said. "I think it'd be fun to write darker stories about things like that. Stories with vampires and werewolves, but no love triangles or anything—"

"Oh, Conner—I forgot I had something I was going to ask you," Bree said.

"Ask me anything," he said.

"Do you have a crush on me or something?" Bree asked him point-blank.

Conner was positive everything in his body came to a complete stop, starting with his brain. He could feel his cheeks filling with so much blood he was worried his head would explode.

"What?" he asked, as if she had asked him if he was a leprechaun. "No! Of course not! Why would you think that?"

“Because you turn bright red and ramble whenever I’m around you,” Bree said. She was neither accusatory nor suspicious; she was just stating the facts calmly as ever.

Conner forced a laugh that was too loud to be genuine. “Oh, *that*? That’s nothing. That’s just my *sodium allergy*.” He was as surprised to say it as she was to hear it.

“Sodium allergy?” Bree asked. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“It’s very rare,” Conner said. “Makes me ramble and turn bright red for no apparent reason.… So that explains all that.…”

He wasn’t sure how far he was planning to go with this. He could tell she wasn’t convinced.

“Sorry, I just thought since we’re going to be sitting next to each other for half a day on this plane I would ask,” Bree said.

“I appreciate you asking,” Conner said. “That would have been totally awkward.… Just sitting here… for hours and hours… one of us crushing on the other… glad that’s not the case…”

Conner wanted to die. He fantasized about crawling out the window and curling up in the plane’s propeller. He couldn’t decide what was more mortifying: giving the impression that he had a crush on her or that there may have been some truth to her suspicion. Conner had never had a *crush* before; he wouldn’t have known if he had. But after being accused of having one, it slowly dawned on him that that must have been his problem —*he had a crush on Bree!*

He looked out the window, too horrified to look at anything else. What was he supposed to do now that he had been diagnosed with a crush? Was there an anti-crush pill he could take? Was there a gland on his heart that could be removed? Was it terminal?

Soon the plane pulled away from the gate and proceeded to the runway. It took off with a jolt and Conner watched in amazement as the airport below them became smaller and smaller.

“Amazing,” Conner said under his breath.

“Have you ever flown before?” Bree asked him.

“Not on a plane,” Conner said without thinking.

Bree squinted. “Then what did you fly on? A magic carpet?” she asked.

It took Conner a moment to realize she was being sarcastic. “I’ve been —um—*ballooning* before. It was really neat but nothing like this.

Technology is almost like magic these days."

"You know, Arthur C. Clarke said that magic is just science we don't understand yet," Bree quoted.

Conner smiled. "Not always," he said to himself.

"Pardon?" Bree asked.

"Oh, nothing," Conner said. "That's a great quote."

Bree narrowed her eyes and stared at him suspiciously. "Where did you go ballooning?" she asked.

"It's a long story." Conner shrugged it off. "It was with my sister in my grandmother's—um—*state*. But this is my first time being on a plane."

"Looks like you're having all kinds of *first experiences*," Bree said with a smile of her own. Luckily for Conner, she then popped an earbud into her other ear and began reading one of her books before he could panic or respond with something else embarrassing.

If this was just the beginning of the trip, he didn't want to think about what the rest of it would entail. Conner wanted to crawl out of his skin but Bree didn't seem at all affected by their conversation. She just kept turning the pages of her murder-mystery novel, completely immersed in every word.

An hour or so into the flight Conner got up to use the restroom. When he exited the shoebox-size stall he was accosted by Mindy, Cindy, Lindy, and Wendy. They stood right in front of him, blocking his way back to his seat.

"Can I help you?" Conner asked.

"We need to talk to you," Mindy said. They all scowled at him with the same serious eyes. They looked like a pack of hungry cats.

"Here?" Conner asked. "At the bathroom on a moving plane?"

The girls nodded. "We figured it was the best place to talk to you privately," Cindy said. "And so you couldn't get away."

Conner looked for help but the closest flight attendant was serving drinks on the other side of the cabin.

"Have you been planning this ambush?" Conner asked.

Wendy nodded.

"Since the end of the last school year," Lindy said.

"Okay…," Conner said. "What's up?"

All the girls looked to one another, excited to finally interrogate him.

"How's Alex doing, Conner?" Lindy said. She crossed her arms. Her left

eyebrow was raised so high it almost touched the ceiling.

“She’s fine,” Conner said. “She’s going to school and living with my grandma in Vermont. Why do you ask?”

Mindy threw her hands into the air. “*Vermont! Vermont*, he says!” she declared as if Conner had said his sister was living on Mars. “Do you have any proof of this? A photo or a postcard with Alex’s handwriting, perhaps?”

“You think I’m lying to you?” Conner asked. He was beginning to worry they might be on to something. How much did they already know?

Cindy stepped closer to him and looked directly into his eyes. “We practically live in the library, and last year we saw some *things*, some *questionable things*,” she said.

“Like what?” Conner asked.

“Well, for starters, Alex used to come into the library every day at lunch,” Mindy said. “And every day she would go to the back and take *one* book off the shelf.”

“She would hug it and whisper sweet nothings into its spine!” Lindy continued.

“Why would she do that, Conner? Your sister was the smartest girl in the school. It was so out of character for her to be talking to inanimate objects, don’t you think?” Cindy said.

Wendy squinted and nodded.

“So you’re ambushing me on a plane because my sister hugged a book?” Conner asked, trying to make them seem crazy.

“We think she was *talking to someone*!” Mindy said. “She used to say things like ‘Please take me away’ and ‘I want to go back!’ ”

“And then the next thing we know, Alex is gone,” Lindy said.

“Left for *Vermont*, or so you say,” Cindy said, and swiveled her head.

Conner tried to make his face as expressionless as possible. He didn’t want to give them any hint that their suspicions were remotely valid. “You guys are insane,” he said. “What are you implying? Do you think Alex ran away?”

Mindy clenched both her fists in frustration. “I don’t know if she ran away, is working for the government, was abducted by aliens, or something else,” she said intensely. “All I know is, something isn’t right and I know you know the truth! And even if you don’t tell us what’s going on, we’re gonna find out!”

“Because that’s what the Book Huggers do,” Lindy said. “We read between the *lies* and get to the bottom of things.”

Wendy nodded again and punched the palm of her hand in a threatening manner.

“The Book Huggers?” Conner asked.

“That’s what we’ve renamed the Reading Club,” Cindy said. “In honor of Alex… wherever she is.”

However close they were to discovering the truth, they were still the most obnoxious people Conner had ever had to deal with and that kept him from spilling any of his family’s secrets.

“I think you guys read too much,” he said. He pushed his way through them and went back to his seat. He could feel their cold glares on his back as he went.

When Conner sat down he noticed Bree wasn’t staring as attentively at her book as before and she had pulled an earbud out of her ear. Had she been listening to the Book Huggers assault him?

“So your sister lives in Vermont now?” Bree asked.

“Yes, with my grandma,” Conner said. Bree’s questions were much more difficult to dodge. He felt himself wanting to tell her the truth about his sister—and anything else she may have wanted to know.

“Vermont’s pretty far,” she said.

“It is,” Conner said. “But we talk on the phone a lot.”

“So that’s where you went ballooning, then, I take it?” she questioned him further, starting her own interrogation.

“Um… yeah,” Conner asked. “Why?”

“Just curious,” Bree said blankly. “So if you’ve never flown before, how did you get all the way up to Vermont?”

He knew she could see the uncertainty in his face. “Train?” Conner peeped.

A coy smile spread across her face. “Interesting…,” Bree said. “I see why they’d be suspicious.”

She wasn’t looking at him like a boy she thought had a crush on her anymore, but rather the way she looked at her novels: He was the mystery she was invested in now.

Bree placed the earbud back into her ear and returned to her book, occasionally side-eyeing him over the course of the flight. Conner made

himself as comfortable as possible in his tiny seat. His first flight would also undoubtedly be the longest flight of his life.

J&G

Chapter Four

A WEDDING IN THE WOODS

Alex spent the following afternoon on the grand balcony of the Fairy Palace. She leaned on the railing and gazed at the beautiful sights around her. Everywhere she looked she could see fairies of all shapes and sizes preparing the palace and the gardens for the Inaugural Ball. Every flower bloomed a little brighter, every pond rippled a bit clearer, and every bird's chirp was a little merrier. The whole kingdom was buzzing with excitement for the ball… except for Alex.

A year ago Alex had wanted nothing more than to live with her grandmother in the Land of Stories. Just the idea of learning magic and becoming a fairy had seemed like a stretch, but here she was, days away from being introduced to society as a new member of the Fairy Council. It was more than she could ever have wished for, more than she would ever have thought possible, and maybe more than she could handle.

After defeating Ezmia, the evil Enchantress, she had proven herself capable of leading the fairy-tale world—but perhaps she still hadn't proven it to *herself* yet.

A large shadow eclipsed the balcony and Alex looked up to see Mother Goose and Lester descending from the sky above.

"Hey, kiddo! I've got something to tell you!" Mother Goose called down. Lester landed on the balcony and Mother Goose dismounted and joined Alex at the railing.

"What is it?" Alex asked. She eyed a questionable sack of gold coins Mother Goose was clutching to her side.

Mother Goose cautiously looked around the balcony to make sure no one was in earshot. "Now, don't tell anyone you heard this from me, but I just ran into some friends of yours in the Dwarf Forests," she told her.

"What were you doing in the Dwarf Forests?"

"I was playing my weekly card game with a few of my gambling buddies, but that's not the point." Mother Goose held the sack of gold coins

a little tighter. “I bumped into Jack and Goldilocks. They had some very exciting news to share with me and wanted to pass it along to you.”

“What is it?” Alex asked eagerly. The last time she saw Jack and Goldilocks had been the night Bob proposed to her mom at the Charming Palace. She had always wondered what kind of mischief they had been up to since then.

“Apparently they’re getting *married*!” Mother Goose said.

Alex happily clapped her hands. “That’s incredible news!”

“I guess Jack popped the question while they were in combat with a gaggle of Corner Kingdom soldiers—he said he knew it would make Goldilocks swoon,” Mother Goose said.

“When are they getting married?” Alex asked.

“*This evening!* Just before dusk in the Dwarf Forests! Talk about short notice,” Mother Goose told her. “They decided it would be best to do it with as little notice as possible. You know how cautious fugitives get about their whereabouts. They asked me to officiate the ceremony and pass along an invitation to you.”

“Well, that *is* short notice but I wouldn’t miss it for the world!” Alex was suddenly happy that her grandmother was forcing her to take the week off. “But where in the Dwarf Forests?”

“They told me to meet them in the clearing just south of the dwarf mines,” Mother Goose said with a shrug and an eye roll. “I don’t know why they want to have their wedding there—maybe all the swamps were booked? Anyway, the guest list is very exclusive; only a few people know it’s even happening, so keep it to yourself, especially around here. You know how judgmental these fairy folks get when any of us try to have a little fun now and then.”

“How exciting!” Alex said. “I can’t wait. I think a wedding is just what I need to distract myself from all this Inaugural Ball business.”

“Tell me about it,” Mother Goose said. “I hope I’m still good for it. The last time I officiated a wedding, Puss in Boots drank all my bubbly and started playing a fiddle, a cow convinced everyone he could jump over the moon, and an enchanted dish ran off with a spoon. You know it’s a good party when even the china gets into a little hanky-panky—but I’ll tell you more about that another time.”

Mother Goose hopped aboard Lester, took his reins, and they flew back

into the sky.

Alex was thankful to have something to think about besides the Inaugural Ball. She left the Fairy Palace a good hour or two before dusk to meet Cornelius so they would have enough time to travel to the dwarf mines. However, when she went to meet him in the field just outside the gardens, an even greater distraction was waiting for her.

“Hello there,” said a smooth voice Alex wasn’t expecting. She stopped in her tracks. Across the field near the edge of the stream, she saw Cornelius lying on his back and Farmer Robins’s son rubbing his belly like a kitten.

“What are *you* doing here?” Alex asked, and placed a hand on her wand. She couldn’t be too sure what his intentions were.

“I hope you don’t mind the intrusion,” the farmer’s son said, walking closer to her.

The truth was Alex didn’t mind at all, but she wasn’t about to let him know that. “How did you find me?”

“I didn’t—I found your unicorn,” he explained. “He wasn’t hard to pick out. I assumed if I found him I would eventually see you again.”

Alex had to assess the situation twice. First, as a fairy, she assumed the boy whom she had recently helped was probably seeking her help again. Second, as a fourteen-year-old girl, hearing that a cute boy wanted to see her made her blush.

“Well, here I am. What can I help you with?” Alex said collectedly.

“I don’t need help with anything,” the farmer’s son said. “I just wanted to thank you for what you did at our farm. My father hates fairies, especially when they help us out, but I know deep down inside he’s grateful, too.”

Alex nodded. “You’re very welcome—wait, what’s your name?” she asked.

“My name is Rook,” he said. “Rook Robins.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Rook,” Alex said. “And you never have to thank me. Helping people is what we do best. Now if you’ll please excuse me, Cornelius and I have somewhere we need to be—”

“Wait.” Rook stepped between her and Cornelius. “Before you go, I have something I wanted to ask you.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

Rook looked at his feet and kicked a rock near his foot. “The truth is, you’re *different* from any other fairy I’ve ever met. You’re not all sparkles and bubbles, and you aren’t afraid to get your hands dirty. I really like you and I’ve been thinking about you an awful lot since I saw you at the farm.”

Alex could feel her heart start to beat a little faster, but she ignored it, not wanting to get her hopes up. Where was he going with this?

“You can say no and I would understand, but I was wondering, would you like to take a walk or something with me sometime?” Rook said. He was scared to ask the question and terrified to hear her answer.

Alex stopped completely: She stopped breathing, she stopped thinking, and she was pretty sure her heart stopped beating. She forgot about everything on her mind—the Fairy Inaugural Ball, Jack and Goldilocks’s wedding, her name, who she was, where she was, and everything else important. All she could think about was the attractive boy in front of her, his floppy hair, his hazel eyes, and how he wanted to take a walk with her.

With every second that Alex stayed quiet, Rook’s face fell a little more into a frown.

“That’s all right, I understand,” Rook said. “You’re a fairy and I’m just a farmer’s son. I should have known better than even to have asked.”

He turned around and headed out of the field, muttering to himself how stupid he was.

“No, wait!” Alex barely regained control of her senses before it was too late. “I would love to go for a walk with you sometime.”

Rook jerked his whole body back toward her. “You would?” he said with a goofy grin. “Well, that’s… that’s… *splendid*!”

The two stood silently for a moment with giddy smiles frozen on their faces.

“When will you be free?” Rook asked.

“Is tomorrow evening good? Same place, same time?”

“That would be wonderful,” Rook said. “I’ll meet you in this field tomorrow.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Alex said.

“Enjoy the rest of your day—wait, what’s *your* name?”

“My name is Alex,” she said. “Alex Bailey.”

Rook was smiling from ear to ear. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow, *Alex*.” He jogged out of the forest with a confident jump in his step.

Alex finally understood what people meant when they said they had butterflies in their stomach. She felt a jittery tingling sensation sweep through her whole body as if a thousand butterflies were migrating inside of her. A huge smile appeared on her face.

Cornelius got to his feet and walked to Alex's side. He blew a gust of air in her face and bared his teeth in a flirty smile.

"Oh stop it, Cornelius," Alex said. "We're just two people who have decided to go on a walk together, that's all. It's nothing more than that."

Cornelius neighed; Alex wasn't fooling anyone, especially herself. This was a much bigger deal than she wanted to admit.

"Oh my gosh, the wedding! We better get going or I'll be late!" she said. "It's crazy how fast time goes by when you're—"

Cornelius batted his eyelashes and sighed, teasing her to no end.

"No, when you're *running late*," Alex said.

Alex climbed onto Cornelius's back and the two headed west to the Dwarf Forests as the sun began to descend. Galloping across the land at Cornelius's magically enhanced pace made the trip go by fairly quickly, and the thoughts percolating in Alex's head made it seem that much faster.

After all the tribulations she and her brother had gone through in their young lives, until this moment Alex had never had any head space to think about *boys*. She'd always assumed *one day* she might meet someone and fall in love, but as she got older it never dawned on her that *one day* could be getting closer. And now she couldn't help but ask herself if that moment had arrived already.

Was Alex at the beginning of her own classic love story or just entering a stage of adulthood? Was she about to experience romance for the first time in her life or just a mild case of puppy love? Did Alex even want to be invested in someone this early in her life or should she put all her energy into her fairy training?

She couldn't believe how much excitement and mystery one boy had brought into her life so quickly. Was it too early to say she was enjoying this newfound excitement? Would it lead to more exciting experiences? Could Rook Robins be the love of her life or would there be other boys in her future? And if there would be others, did that mean Rook would break her heart?

Alex knew she of all people needed to protect herself. She had been

working too hard to let a silly boy come in and ruin everything she had achieved. She couldn't let him hurt her, distract her from her goals, and—most important—if things went askew she couldn't let him turn her into something or someone she wasn't: She couldn't let anything turn her into *Ezmia*.

Since he had caused her head to spin in so many directions just by asking her to go on a walk, she realized how deeply a bad experience might affect her. The purer the heart, the easier it was to scar, and Alex's heart was as pure as they came.

"Alex, get ahold of yourself," she whispered under her breath. *"Just because you're a fourteen-year-old girl doesn't mean you need to* think *like one. He just wants a walk, not marriage."*

Thankfully, before she could overanalyze the situation to death, Alex and Cornelius crossed into the Dwarf Forests. It didn't matter how old or powerful she became, the thick and dangerous woods of the Dwarf Forests always gave Alex the creeps. These woods were home to some of her worst memories and to some of the worst creatures that lived in the Land of Stories.

She guided Cornelius up one of the only paved paths in the territory and followed a sign that pointed in the direction of the dwarf mines. Just before they reached the mines, a spacious clearing came into view. The clearing had been staged like an outdoor chapel. Two dozen logs had been positioned like bench seats facing the front where a large boulder stood like a pulpit. Carved into the pulpit were the initials J & G, surrounded by a heart.

"Go find some grass to eat, Cornelius," Alex said as she hopped off the unicorn. "I'll come get you as soon as the wedding is over. But don't go too far; these woods aren't exactly unicorn friendly."

Cornelius trotted over to the other side of the clearing while Alex looked for a place to sit. She was one of the first guests to arrive.

A man with a thick, curly mustache and a heavy black cloak sat at the front near the pulpit. A witch who was missing her left arm and most of her teeth sat in the very back with a small troll that had gray skin and large horns.

Sitting in the center of the makeshift chapel was a woman Alex could have picked out in any crowd. She was sitting alone, wearing a large, fluffy

red coat that covered most of her body. A tiny red hat with a matching feather was perched on top of her very stylish blonde hairdo, and she wore a pair of round glasses with red lenses in an attempt to conceal her identity. She glared at the people and creatures around her, anxious about being in their presence.

“Red, it’s so good to see you!” Alex said and took a seat next to the covered queen. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here—”

“Shhh!” Red said, and pressed a finger against her mouth. “Keep your voice down. I don’t want anyone to know who I am.”

Alex looked at her like she was joking. “You’re trying to hide in *that* outfit?”

“Well, forgive me, but I didn’t know what the proper attire was for a fugitive wedding in the woods,” Red said and hid her face deeper in her coat. “I wouldn’t be here except that Charlie talked me into it. Look at the characters around us! Where did Jack and Goldilocks meet these people—a child’s nightmare?”

“Where *is* Froggy?” Alex asked. She couldn’t spot her formerly cursed friend anywhere in the clearing.

“He’s in the woods somewhere with Jack waiting for the wedding to begin,” Red said. “He’s Jack’s best man.”

“Oh, that’s adorable!” Alex said. “Who’s Goldilocks’s maid of honor?”

Red gave an irritated snort she didn’t mind the other guests hearing. Clearly this was a sore subject. “The horse is.”

Alex had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. “I suppose that makes sense,” Alex said. “She and Porridge have been through a lot together. You two, on the other hand, have always had a—how do I say this—teetering relationship.”

“Yes, it’s always been very give and take—*I give* and *she takes*,” Red said. “But we made up once she gave me back the diamond necklace she stole from me. She thought it was just a joke, I thought it was an act punishable by death, blah, blah, blah… but we reconciled and here I am.”

“That’s good news,” Alex said.

“So how are you doing, my dear? How’s your grandmother and everyone in the Fairy Kingdom?” Red asked. “Shimmery as always, I imagine.”

Alex let out a long sigh. “Everyone is getting ready for the big Fairy

Inaugural Ball coming up. I'll officially be a part of the Fairy Council and the Happily Ever After Assembly when it's over," Alex said. She hesitated to bring up the other major subject on her mind, but figured there weren't too many people in her life she could talk about it with. "And, I sort of met *a boy*."

Red did a double take and yanked off her glasses. Her big blue eyes grew even bigger and a crooked smile stretched across her face. *"A boy!"* Red said loudly, the topic obviously so exciting she couldn't be bothered to worry about disguising herself anymore. "Tell me everything! Where did you meet him? How old is he? How tall? What class? What race? What species?"

Alex had difficulty remembering all the questions. "He's the son of a farmer from the Eastern Kingdom. He's older and taller than me. And as far as I know, he's human."

"For now," Red said. "Trust me, being involved with someone who has been cursed to live on and off as a grotesque creature can put a strain on the relationship. But he sounds very promising! I love a good working-class man. What's his name?"

"Rook Robins," Alex said, and she couldn't help but smile just mentioning his name.

"I can tell you really like this boy," Red said with a raised eyebrow.

Alex sighed again as she felt the butterflies reappear in her core. "I'm not sure I'm even ready for all of this," she confided. "I just have so much on my mind these days I'm not sure it's a good time to add a boy into the mix. I keep worrying that it may turn into something really special or really awful—and to be honest, I'm not sure which would be worse."

"Oh, Alex, you need to relax and just enjoy the moment," Red said. "You only have a first love once. What's the worst that could happen?"

"I could get my heart broken and take my aggression out by enslaving the world like the Enchantress did," Alex said matter-of-factly.

"That's a tad extreme," Red said. "But you're nothing like her so you have nothing to worry about."

"Who's to say I'm not?" Alex said. "This is the first time something like this has ever happened to me. If I'm not prepared enough going into it, I might be scarred for life!"

Red placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled warmly. "The first cut is

always the deepest, but not every cut leaves a scar," she said. "If you spend your whole life worrying about getting hurt, then you aren't really living. You don't want to shield yourself so much from the bad stuff that nothing good gets to you, either. Meeting up with a cute boy who likes you isn't going to hurt you."

"Thanks, Red, that was really insightful," Alex said, a little surprised Red had so much knowledge on the topic.

"Well, if there's one thing I know a lot about it's first loves," Red said. "Then again, when I was fourteen I ruined two lives by trying to be with the boy I liked, so I'm not sure how good the advice I'm giving you is. There's a thin line between *in love* and *insane*—and I crossed it many times. But looking back, had I not experienced all those awful things I would never have met Charlie, so in the long run it was all worth it."

They smiled at each other. Red was probably the closest thing to a big sister Alex would ever have. Red had spent years of her life chasing after a boy she could never have, and yet here she was today, happily supporting him at his wedding to another woman. Red had come a very long way, and if Red could overcome heartbreak, Alex figured she could, too.

"So when do you see him next?" Red asked.

"Tomorrow evening," Alex said. "We're going for a walk."

"Oh, how adorable! I've always wondered what poor people do for their first dates," Red said. "I insist you stop by my castle tomorrow before you see him. We can talk about boys and I can help you pick an outfit."

"Are you sure you wouldn't mind?" Alex said. "Aren't you busy being the queen of your own kingdom and all?"

"Oh no, I'd be delighted," Red said. "I just have this silly little meeting at the House of Progress but you can come with me and we can chat during all the boring parts."

"What's the House of Progress?" Alex asked. Surely she must have heard her incorrectly.

"Didn't I tell you?" Red said. "It's just like that place you were telling me about from your world, the one with all the representatives?"

"Congress?" Alex asked.

"Yes, that's the one!" Red said happily. "I decided to copy it! I have a representative from each neighborhood in the Red Riding Hood Kingdom help me make all the decisions. That way every decision is a well-rounded

one and I can’t be solely blamed for anything that goes wrong. But *Congress* sounded so dreary and bleak; I wanted my house of representatives to sound promising and uplifting. I thought *Queen Red Riding Hood’s House of Progress* had such a better ring to it.”

There was movement in the trees around them. They could hear several people approaching the clearing from different parts of the forest.

“Speaking of *ring*, I think the wedding is about to start,” Alex said.

Like clockwork, as the sun began to set in the horizon the remaining wedding guests emerged from the trees around them. Each guest was shadier than the next. There was an ogre covered in yellow warts who took a seat in the front. He was followed by a woman with bright red eyes who knew the witch in the back and sat beside her. A rugged dwarf led a blind dwarf with two eye patches to a seat near Alex and Red. A goblin couple with green-scaled skin sat in front of them.

A woman covered in maroon robes sat close to Alex and Red. The only part of her body that was exposed was her beautiful green eyes. She seemed friendly enough, but like Red, Alex didn’t want to make herself too known in this environment.

Red looked to the sky and took deep breaths, trying to fight off the anxiety that the newcomers caused her. A loud *swoosh* made Alex jump as Mother Goose swooped down from the sky on Lester’s back. They landed at the front of the clearing and Mother Goose took her place behind the stone pulpit. She took a large swig from a flask she had hidden in her hat and cleared her throat before starting the ceremony.

“Hello, ladies, gentlemen, and whatever the rest of you are,” Mother Goose said. “We understand a lot of you are on a tight schedule due to being on the run from the law, or have tried to eat or kill each other in the past, so we’ll make this celebration as short and sweet as possible to avoid any discomfort. Let the wedding begin!”

The crowd cheered, which was an interesting combination of hoots, hollers, and growls. Jack and Charlie, the man forever known as Froggy to the twins, appeared from the trees behind the pulpit. They both wore sharp dress shirts and looked as handsome and charming as ever. Jack looked as anxious as Red about being there, but in a good way.

A soft series of *thump*s came from the back of the clearing and Alex turned to see a white-and-brown-spotted foal walking down the aisle. He

held a basket of rose petals in his mouth and was breathing very heavily, blowing the petals out of the basket and scattering them across the ground with every exhale.

"That's adorable! Who is he?" Alex whispered to Red.

"That's Porridge's new son," Red whispered back. "They call him Oats."

Not too long after Oats reached the front of the clearing, his cream-colored mother trotted down the aisle behind him with a bouquet of daisies in her mouth. Once she joined her son and the others by the pulpit she quickly chewed up the flowers in her mouth and swallowed them.

"Everyone, if you still have your legs, please stand for the bride," Mother Goose asked.

The guests stood and turned to the back of the clearing. Red stayed seated until Alex pulled her up to her feet.

A flock of sparrows perched high in the trees began to sing a beautiful ballad as Goldilocks appeared. She was stunning. She wore a simple but elegant white lacy dress with a long train. She was barefoot and her golden locks of hair flowed all the way down to her waist. Wildflowers had been wrapped around the handle of her sword and she carried it down the aisle like a bouquet. It was beautiful but lethal, just like Goldilocks.

Despite all the gruesome guests, no one could deny that the ceremony had turned out to be beautiful. Goldilocks arrived at the pulpit and she and Jack faced Mother Goose with tears of joy in their eyes.

"Well, sit down already," Mother Goose ordered the crowd. Once they'd obeyed she continued officiating. "Four score and seven years ago—*whoops, wrong speech! sorry*—Dearly beloved, we are gathered *God knows where* today to celebrate the joining of these two wanted fugitives."

Mother Goose turned to face Jack. "Jack, do you take Goldilocks, a woman charged with countless burglaries, breaking and entering, and running from the law—"

"Don't forget attempted murder!" Red called toward the pulpit.

"I wasn't going to," Mother Goose said. "*And* attempted murder, to be your outlawfully wedded wife, in sickness and in health, in arrest and in imprisonment, until death do you part?"

There was no question in Jack's mind. "I do," he said with the biggest smile he had ever been seen with.

Mother Goose turned to Goldilocks. "Goldilocks, do you take this man,

a national hero whose reputation you single-handedly ruined, to be your outlawfully wedded husband, in sickness and in health, in arrest and in imprisonment, until death do you part?”

Goldilocks had never looked so happy in her life. “I do,” she said.

“Well, in that case let’s get this thing over with!” Mother Goose called out. “With the power semi-entrusted in me by the Happily Ever After Assembly, I now pronounce you husband and wife! You may kiss the—”

Before she could permit it, Jack and Goldilocks locked lips and their crowd of guests cheered wildly. Once they were done kissing, they climbed astride Porridge and galloped back down the aisle and off into the sunset with Oats following closely behind.

Mother Goose snapped her fingers and a sign magically appeared over Porridge’s back. It read:

Just Married

Watching the wedding had somehow made all of Alex’s fears and doubts about taking a walk with Rook go away. She wanted to be just as happy as Jack and Goldilocks one day and she didn’t care how many emotional obstacles she’d have to go through to get there.

“All right, now everyone get out of here before I’m seen with you,” Mother Goose said. “And to that ogre in the back—you still owe me seventeen gold coins from our card game last week! I haven’t forgotten!”

All the guests disappeared into the forest as quickly as they had appeared. Froggy joined Alex and Red in the center of the clearing and gave Alex an enormous hug.

“Hello, Alex! It’s always wonderful to see you!” he said. “Lovely wedding, don’t you think?”

“It was beautiful,” Alex said. “Don’t you think it was beautiful, Red?”

Red didn’t respond. Her arms were crossed and she was frowning in the direction Jack and Goldilocks had ridden off in.

“Darling, what’s wrong?” Froggy asked. “Didn’t you enjoy the ceremony?”

“I did,” Red said unconvincingly. “Especially the dress—because it was *mine*! She stole it from me!”

HIER LIEGT
WILHELM GRIMM
HIER LIEGT
JACOB GRIMM

Chapter Five

INSIGHT AT THE GRAVE SITE

After being on the plane for what felt like a week, Conner and the others finally reached London's Heathrow Airport, where they boarded their connecting flight to Berlin. Seeing so many people of different cultures and nationalities traveling around them made Conner feel very worldly. He was sure he'd return home much more dignified than when he left—dignified but exhausted, that is. By the time their second flight touched German ground, Conner had only slept three hours of their fifteen-hour journey, and wondered if his neck would ever recover from sitting in a cramped position for so long.

"I recommend we try to sleep as soon as we get to the hotel," Mrs. Peters instructed her group as she led the way to the baggage claim area. "We don't want to be too jet-lagged for the readings tomorrow."

Mrs. Peters, Bree, and the Book Huggers collected their luggage at the baggage claim with no problem, but Betsy was nowhere to be found. Conner wasn't worried about his luggage being lost, though. On the contrary, he thought wearing the same clothes for the next few days might be worth not having to lug the decaying trunk around Germany. Just as he had happily come to terms with the idea, Betsy slid down into the luggage carousel, making more noise than any other suitcase had. Betsy had arrived in Germany and she wanted everyone to know about it.

The group followed Mrs. Peters through the crowded Berlin airport as they made their way toward the *Ausgang*, or "exit." They shuffled their way outside where Mrs. Peters had arranged for a small van to pick them up. The driver was a stern older man with a plump face and a thin mustache. He held up a sign that said PETERS.

"Guten Tag," Mrs. Peters said to the driver. "I'm Evelyn Peters, so nice to meet you."

"HELLO," Cindy said very loudly to the driver, and forced him to shake her hand. "WE'RE FROM THE UNITED STATES. IT'S AN HONOR TO

BE IN YOUR COUNTRY.”

Everyone rolled their eyes at her except the driver. Clearly this wasn’t his first experience with a tourist like Cindy, the type who gave tourists a bad name.

“I’m German, not hard of hearing,” the driver said in perfect English. “Let me load your bags into the van and we’ll be on our way to your hotel.”

As the driver drove them away from the airport, all eyes in the group widened as they took in the first sights of a new country. Seeing his first glimpses of Germany reminded Conner of seeing the Land of Stories for the first time; they were so far away from home, yet a very familiar world of its own existed here. The Book Huggers took out their cameras and started taking pictures of everything they saw.

“Look, it’s a telephone pole!” Lindy said, and showed the others the photo she’d taken of it.

“It looks just like the telephone poles back home,” Bree said.

“But it’s a *German* telephone pole,” Lindy said, as if Bree was missing something.

Every street the van drove down gave them something new to gawk at that they would never see at home. A massive cathedral with gargoyles stood next to an office building made entirely out of glass. An abstract art installation of a balloon dog was planted near a statue honoring a famous German opera singer. Tiny shops that looked like gingerbread houses were across the street from strip malls similar to ones in the United States.

Berlin was unlike any city Conner and the girls had ever been to. It was a combination of new and old, with monuments celebrating people and events of the past, alongside tributes encouraging thoughts and ideas for the future.

“Of all the cities in the world, Berlin is very much among those that shaped the world into what it is today,” Mrs. Peters said. “There is history everywhere you look, some noble, some terrible, but highly important nonetheless.”

Conner took what she said to heart. He looked out the window and wondered just how many people had traveled down these streets before him, and what their lives had been like.

“It seems more *dirty* than *historical* to me,” Mindy said, not showing any enthusiasm. “Look at that wall over there—it’s covered in graffiti!”

“That’s the Berlin Wall, Mindy,” Bree said. “It’s one of the most important and historic sites on earth.”

The driver let out an amused snort under his breath and Mindy turned bright red. The other girls instantly started taking as many pictures of it as they could.

“Oh,” Mindy said. “Well, you’d think there would be a sign or something.”

Occasionally they would see a brown poster taped to a bus stop or pinned to a message board advertising the Brothers Grimm event.

At a couple stops, they found the poster had even been translated into English:

> The University of Berlin Presents
>
> A Grimm-Fest
>
> Be among the first to hear three never-before-told stories by the Brothers Grimm as the University of Berlin opens a time capsule left by the famous storytelling duo.
>
> Wednesday, 12:00 noon
>
> St. Matthäus-Kirchhof cemetery
>
> Contact the University of Berlin for ticket information

Seeing the posters around town made the group even more excited about the readings. Mrs. Peters pulled a thick itinerary out of her purse and went over it with her fellow travelers.

“Let’s all take a quick nap when we arrive and then perhaps we can go for a walk around the city before dinner,” she said. “The stories will be read at the cemetery at noon tomorrow, so we’ll meet in the lobby at ten o’clock for the complimentary breakfast, or if you want to sleep in, we’ll be leaving the hotel at eleven o’clock sharp. Then after the readings we can have lunch in a café of our choice and I’ve scheduled a bike tour of Tiergarten Park. Then on Thursday we’ll visit the Brandenburg Gate, the Chancellery, and a couple museums. On our last day I thought we could visit some of the local shops before our flight home.”

They all nodded excitedly although Conner wasn’t as thrilled at the idea of spending a whole day shopping as the girls were.

Soon the group arrived at Hotel Gewaltiger Palast, which Mrs. Peters

told them meant the “Enormous Palace Hotel” in German. However, the translation didn’t live up to their expectations. There was nothing very big or grand about the hotel at all. It was fairly small, very plain, and had only a few staff members. According to what the group could make out from the photos framed on the wall, the hotel had been owned by the same family since before World War II.

The older woman behind the front desk also looked like she had been there since before the war. She was tall with curly gray hair, and her beaded eyeglasses chain was the most colorful thing in the lobby. Her English wasn’t as good as the driver’s had been but she was able to check them in without a hitch.

There was obvious annoyance in her eyes as she helped them get settled. Conner couldn’t tell if she didn’t like Americans specifically or just people in general. Mrs. Peters helped her pass out the hotel room keys.

“Although I doubt I have to worry about anything with this particular group, I must remind everyone that even though we’re in a different country, all school rules and policies will strictly be enforced while we’re on this trip,” Mrs. Peters warned them. “Now, everyone, try to get some sleep.”

They boarded the elevator. Wendy and Lindy were sharing a room on the second floor. Bree was sharing a room with Mindy and Cindy on the third floor. Conner had his own room on the fourth floor, but Mrs. Peters stayed in the elevator after he got off.

“Where is your room, Mrs. Peters?” Conner asked, holding the elevator door open.

“I’ve booked myself the Chancellor’s Suite,” she told him. “When you get to be my age, Mr. Bailey, you’ll learn that nothing is worth traveling for unless you can do it in absolute comfort. Sleep well.”

The elevator doors closed and Conner found his room. He wasn’t surprised to see how bleak the room was. The bed was small and looked stiff, the carpet was brown and smelled as old as it looked, and the beige wallpaper was peeling in the corners. Conner didn’t mind too much, though; he knew his accommodations reflected the budget he was traveling on.

He tossed Betsy on the chair in the corner and dived into the bed. It was even stiffer than he’d thought and the sheets felt like they were made of

paper. As uncomfortable as it was, Conner still expected to fall asleep instantly upon becoming horizontal, but even after lying there for ten minutes with his eyes closed, Conner was wide awake. He was either jet-lagged or just too tired to sleep.

“I wonder if Alex is around,” Conner said to himself. “She’ll get a kick out of seeing this room.”

He opened Betsy and retrieved the small piece of mirror he had chipped off at home. He tapped the glass with his index finger and it started shimmering as it tried connecting him to his sister in the fairy-tale world. He stared at his reflection, hoping it would change into his sister’s at any moment. Unfortunately, the reflection didn’t change.

“I wish magic mirrors had answering machines,” Conner said, and tossed it back into his suitcase.

He went to the window and looked out at the small piece of Berlin he could see. A little part of him felt at home knowing he was in the part of the world where the Brothers Grimm had lived. Perhaps the Brothers Grimm had met his grandmother and the other fairies on the very street his hotel was on. Perhaps before it was a hotel the building had been an old tavern where Mother Goose had met them for a drink one afternoon.

Mrs. Peters was right: There was so much history in this city—more than Conner could have imagined. He could have sworn he felt Berlin’s old and experienced heart beating in the ground far beneath him.

Conner’s gaze eventually returned to the hotel and he saw Bree leaning out a window below him. Both earbuds were plugged into her ears and she was looking out at the city just as he had. He wondered if she was thinking the same things he was. He imagined how excited Bree would be if he told her about the history of Germany that only he knew. Surely she would then think he was as cool as she was.

Bree looked up and caught Conner staring at her. Conner froze and his face went white. He couldn’t believe he had been so careless. Bree just laughed and waved up at him. Conner waved back, acting like he had just noticed her. He quickly shut the window and the drapes before he could seem any creepier and lay down for the recommended nap.

When he woke up from the nap, Conner was so jet-lagged he felt like he was underwater. He went on a walk with Mrs. Peters and the girls, and they got a quick bite to eat at a small restaurant down the street from their hotel.

Conner tried to avoid looking at Bree altogether—he was positive his cheeks would explode if she caught him looking at her for another second.

When he returned to his hotel room, Conner tried contacting his sister again, but there was still no reply. He figured she was deep in preparations for the ball.

The next morning Conner awoke just as tired as he'd been when he went to bed—he was worried jet lag may have been a terminal illness. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand and panicked when he realized he had overslept and only had five minutes before they were supposed to leave. He jumped out of bed like he was in the middle of a fire drill and quickly threw on his clothes and brushed his teeth.

Conner didn't even wait for the elevator—he ran down the stairs to the lobby. He quickly grabbed a piece of toast at the complimentary-breakfast table, and met Mrs. Peters and the girls by the hotel entrance at five *past* eleven. They were standing by a pamphlet rack looking at all the things there were to do in the area.

"Sorry I'm late," Conner said. "I overslept."

The Book Huggers glared at him as if he had committed a federal offense.

"Not to worry, Mr. Bailey," Mrs. Peters said. "Five minutes late is not a tragedy."

"Good thing you're not a paramedic or a train operator," Mindy said, and crossed her arms. She and the Book Huggers were going to take any opportunity to scold him that they could.

"Let's get on our way to the cemetery so we can enjoy some of the festivities before the readings begin," Mrs. Peters instructed.

They left the hotel and found the driver from the day before waiting for them outside. They climbed aboard the van and all sat on the edge of their seats, excited about their first German adventure. The van hurried through the Berlin streets and the girls once again took pictures of everything they saw. They drove through Tiergarten Park, which stretched through the center of the city like a German version of Central Park, and past the iconic Brandenburg Gate. Conner instantly recognized the gate's pillars and its statue of a chariot at the top. A few minutes later, once they'd driven through a winding maze of buildings, they finally arrived at St. Matthäus-Kirchhof cemetery.

Although Conner hadn’t been sure what to expect, the cemetery was different from what he had imagined. It was at the end of a long cul-de-sac and almost looked like a courtyard to the tall apartment and office buildings that surrounded it. A domed playground sat a few feet away from the hundred-and-fifty-year-old cemetery’s entrance; even it was no exception to Berlin’s integration of old and new.

A massive stone gate guarded the entrance to the cemetery. It was covered with traces of dead ivy and had a crucifix at its peak. Although it was the oldest structure in this part of the city, it had maintained its authoritative and imperial prestige over the years. There was something about the gate that demanded respect.

Brown welcoming posters advertising the Grimm-Fest were placed all over the gate. Their van was one of many vans and buses dropping people off for the readings. There were even a couple news crews covering the event.

“Here we are!” Mrs. Peters said. She led her group out of the van and through the stone gate.

“This place is creepy,” Lindy said, and Wendy nodded along with her. They were hesitant to go very far inside.

“This place is awesome,” Bree said, and took a picture of the gate with her phone; it was her first picture of the trip.

Beyond the gate, the cemetery was very festive. Everywhere they looked they saw students from the University of Berlin in brown shirts that matched the posters answering attendees’ questions. Teachers and students of all ages, from all corners of the globe, were clumped throughout the cemetery, speaking in different languages.

Most of the attendees were gathered around the miniature chapel in the center of the cemetery. A red velvet rope blocked the front steps, making the porch into a stage of sorts. In the center of the porch was a white pillar with a glass display case on top of it. Inside the case was a very old wooden chest. Without a doubt, Conner knew he was looking at the Brothers Grimm time capsule. He smiled from ear to ear. Alex and his grandmother would have been as happy as he was to see so many people so enthusiastic about the work of the Brothers Grimm.

“Mrs. Weiss! Mrs. Weiss!” Mrs. Peters called out to the crowd ahead of her. A woman who could only be described as the German version of Mrs.

Peters turned to face them. She wore almost the exact same pair of glasses and dress that Mrs. Peters had on.

“Mrs. Peters! It’s so wonderful to see you!” Mrs. Weiss said, embracing her old friend.

“Students, allow me to introduce an old colleague of mine, Mrs. Weiss,” Mrs. Peters said to Conner and the girls. “She’s the reason we’re here. She teaches English in Frankfurt and contacted me immediately once she heard about today’s event.”

“I’m so happy you could make it,” Mrs. Weiss said, and looked down at her watch. “The readings should begin in twenty minutes or so, but until then, please have a look around the cemetery. There is face painting and a short story contest on the south lawn.”

“Yes, please enjoy yourselves while Mrs. Weiss and I catch up,” Mrs. Peters instructed them. “Just don’t go too far.”

The group split up, going in separate directions like moths drawn to different lights. Mindy and Cindy went to check out the face painting while Lindy and Wendy hurried to see if it was too late to enter the short story contest. Conner wandered deeper into the cemetery to discover it by himself.

The perimeter of the cemetery was lined with enormous mausoleums while smaller graves and tombstones were scattered across the center of the lawns. The dates of birth and death spanned to more than two hundred years ago. Conner almost couldn’t believe how long most of the dead had been buried there. He did, however, have an inkling of what it would be like, after flying internationally and being stuck in his own cramped space for a long period of time.

He walked along the mausoleums admiring the pillars, statues, and stained-glass windows. He figured these must be the grave sites of the very important and wealthy—he was sure he would find the graves of Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm among them. But after walking the perimeter of the graveyard twice, he still hadn’t found their place of rest.

A cluster of people were gathered around a row of smaller graves in the center of the cemetery. Conner’s curiosity got the best of him and he went to see what all the fuss was about.

Finally, he pushed his way through the crowd and saw who all the excitement was for. Everyone was huddled around four identical graves

lined up in a row. Each tombstone was tall, dark gray, and square. Conner had to read the names on the last two in the row twice before he believed his eyes. He was staring at the very humble graves of Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, buried alongside Wilhelm's sons Rudolf and Herman.

"I don't believe it," Conner said to himself.

"What don't you believe?" said a familiar voice. Conner looked to his right and saw Bree standing beside him. She had also just pushed her way to the front of the observers.

"I can't believe this is it," Conner said. "You'd think the most important storytellers who ever lived would have flashier graves. I expected a big crypt with statues of fairy-tale characters and stained-glass windows of castles and gingerbread houses. But this is pretty dull."

"I kind of like it," Bree said, and snapped a picture of the graves with her phone. "Very simple and refined, that's how I'd like to be remembered, I think. Besides, I have a suspicion they don't care very much anymore."

"I guess," Conner said. He was disheartened by the whole thing. He felt the Brothers Grimm deserved much more.

Bree seemed to find his disappointment charming. "I don't think anyone gets remembered exactly the way they want to," she said. "You just have to do the best you can with what you have and hope you're recognized for it. But I doubt there's anyone else in this cemetery that can draw a crowd this size."

A horn sounded through the graveyard. Everyone turned to the chapel and saw a man dressed in ceremonial lederhosen blowing a trumpet on the porch. Noon had arrived and the readings were about to begin. The crowds of people scattered across the cemetery grounds migrated toward the front steps of the chapel, eager to hear the untold stories of the Brothers Grimm. Conner and Bree walked over together and regrouped with Mrs. Peters and the Book Huggers.

"I'm so excited," Cindy said, and clapped her hands.

"I hope one of the stories is about an awful curse like in 'Sleeping Beauty,' " Mindy said. "I've always loved a good curse!"

"I hope one of them is a sequel or a prequel to one of their other stories," Lindy said. "It would be amazing to hear what happened to our favorite characters before or after the stories that we know."

Conner chuckled—he knew, but he wasn't going to share it with them.

“Is something funny, Conner?” Mindy asked.

“Oh no, I’m just excited, too,” he said with a shrug.

A woman emerged from the chapel and the crowd greeted her with warm applause. Conner figured she must be a local celebrity. She was tall and plump with a round, rosy face. She wore a bright orange dress with large buttons that matched her short, curly orange hair perfectly. She stood at a microphone that had been placed next to the time capsule, and waved to the crowd.

She greeted the onlookers first in German, then in French, and then in English.

“Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to St. Matthäus-Kirchhof cemetery,” she cheerfully greeted in a German accent. “My name is Sofia Amsel and the University of Berlin has given me the pleasure of reading to you three brand-new fairy tales written by the Brothers Grimm. They have never been heard before today.”

The English speakers in the crowd cheered. Sofia removed the wooden chest from the glass case and held it delicately in her hands.

“This chest was recently found in the archives of the University of Berlin from 1811. It was the will of the Brothers Grimm themselves that the stories inside be opened and read to the public two hundred years later,” Sofia announced. “I will read each story in German first, then in French, and finally in English. The stories will be translated into other languages and made available on the University of Berlin’s website. Now, it is my honor to read the first story.”

The crowd happily cheered. She gently opened the wooden chest and removed an aged scroll of parchment wrapped in a white ribbon. The man in the lederhosen carefully took the chest from Sofia and held it while she read the first story into the microphone.

As she had promised, Sofia read it first in German and second in French. Conner and the girls heard the German- and French-speaking people in the crowd squeal and laugh in delight as the story was read, clapping at the parts that tickled them the most.

Conner’s anxiety bubbled up more and more the closer she got to telling the story in English. He couldn’t wait to hear who or what the Brothers Grimm had written about, and wondered if it would be anyone he or his sister knew.

Sofia cleared her throat before beginning to read in English. “The first story is called ‘The Curvy Tree,’ ” she announced.

Conner’s face instantly went red. He gasped so quickly and so hard that he started coughing. He could feel Bree’s suspicious glare on the side of his face.

“How funny,” Conner said to her when he caught his breath. “That’s the name of *my* story. What a coincidence.”

“Yeah, a *coincidence*…,” Bree said. Her suspicion was short-lived, though, and soon faded away. After all, what else could it have been but a coincidence? She looked back at Sofia as she began reading from the scroll.

Once upon a time, in a faraway forest, there lived a tree that was different from all the other trees in the woods. While the other trees grew perfectly straight toward the sky, this particular tree grew in loops, twists, and turns. It was known as the Curvy Tree by all who saw it, and many humans and animals came from far and wide to see its splendor.

When the humans and animals were away, in a language that only could be heard by the plants of the forest, the other trees would taunt the poor Curvy Tree. ‘We hate your bark and your branches and your leaves that twist and turn! One day they will chop you into firewood and you will forever burn!’ It made the Curvy Tree very sad, and if you spoke Plant you would hear it cry itself to sleep every night.

Years later, on the last day of winter before spring began, loggers traveled to the forest looking for wood, not to burn, but to build with. They cut down every tree in the woods to build houses, tables, chairs, and beds. When they finally left the forest, only one tree remained, and I bet it will come as no surprise when I tell you it was the Curvy Tree.

The loggers had seen how its trunk and branches twisted and turned and they knew they could never use its wood to build with. And so the Curvy Tree was left alone to grow in peace now that all the other trees were gone. The end.

The English speakers met the conclusion of the tale with thunderous applause.

Conner kept his hands at his sides. “How amazing,” he said to Bree with a guilty chuckle. “I came up with almost the exact same story as the Brothers Grimm. I must be a better writer than I thought.” He was all fake laughs and smiles but he could tell this was no laughing matter to her.

Bree side-eyed him like she had on the plane. “Yeah… amazing,” she said through the corner of her mouth, but *amazing* was far from the word she was looking for.

Sofia retrieved the second scroll from the chest, also tied with a white ribbon, and began reading it in German. She eventually finished reading it in French, and began her English translation.

“The second story is titled ‘The Walking Fish,’ ” Sofia declared to the eager crowd.

Conner’s eyes grew twice in size—he was in serious trouble now. Bree shook her head; surely she had heard it wrong.

“Wait a second, did she just say the second story was called ‘The Walking Fish’—” Bree began, but before she could finish Sofia had already started the second story.

Once upon a time there was a fish who lived in a deep lake all by himself. Every day the fish would watch with envy as a boy from the nearby village played with the animals on the land. The boy would run with the horses, wrestle with the dogs, and climb the trees with the squirrels. The fish wanted so badly to play with the boy, too, but he knew that as a fish it was impossible.

One day a fairy flying high above the lake dropped her wand in the water. The fish, being the gentleman he was, retrieved the wand for the fairy.

‘As a reward for this kind gesture, I will grant you one wish,’ the fairy told the fish. He thought long but he didn’t think hard, for the fish knew which wish he wanted the fairy to grant him.

‘I want legs, just like all the animals on the land, so I, too, can play with the little boy from the village,’ the fish said. With one simple flick of her wand, the fairy magically turned the fish’s fins into

legs and feet and he walked on land for the first time.

The next day when the boy appeared, the fish happily showed him his new legs. The two became very good friends and every day they ran with the horses, wrestled with the dogs, and climbed trees with the squirrels. However, one day the little boy was playing too close to the edge of the lake and fell into the water. The fish ran to the edge of the lake and tried to save him, but he couldn't go in the water without his fins. The little boy couldn't swim, either, and drowned in the lake.

The fish wished he had never wished for legs, because had he just stayed the normal fish God had intended him to be, the little boy would still be alive to this day.

The English speakers, including Mrs. Peters and the Book Huggers, all made an *aww* sound at the sad ending. Conner and Bree were the only ones who didn't make a sound. Both their mouths had dropped open while the story was read.

"Wow, *another* coincidence" was all Conner could say to Bree, but she didn't respond.

"It's a very sad story, but I think we can all agree that great lessons come from tragic tales," Sofia said to the crowd. " 'Be careful what you wish for' is what the Brothers Grimm are trying to tell us with this story, I presume."

Mrs. Peters was inquisitively furrowing her brow. "I swear I've read these stories before somewhere," she said to herself, and Conner's pulse rose. "Didn't *you* write similar stories, Conner?"

"I did!" Conner said, deciding it was in his best interest to seem excited about it. "My stories are creepily similar—it's crazy."

The Book Huggers unanimously rolled their eyes at him. Mrs. Peters smiled and patted Conner on the back, thankfully not spending any more thought on it.

Bree was as quiet as ever but her expression was so intense Conner could practically *hear* her trying to logically assess the situation. She was a girl who loved a good mystery, but *this* was baffling. How could Conner have known these stories before the rest of the world did? Bree must have known this was more than a coincidence.

Conner couldn't believe his bad luck. What were the chances that two of

the three stories the Brothers Grimm had locked away in their time capsule were stories Conner had tried passing off as his own? At least the odds were in his favor: The situation was so unlikely that the worst thing he could be accused of was *psychic plagiarism.* But from the way Bree was looking at him, he knew *plagiarism* was the last thing on her mind.

"Now it's time for our third and final story," Sofia regretfully told the crowd. "Since our English-speaking friends have been so patient, I will read this one in English first."

Conner let out a long, heavy sigh, bracing himself for whatever trouble the third story might cause him. Sofia removed the last scroll from the chest. Unlike the others, this scroll was tied with a red ribbon.

"This must be a very important story if it was tied with a different ribbon from the rest," Sofia said. She opened the scroll. "The last story is called 'The Secret Castle.' "

Conner slumped a few inches with relief. He definitely had never heard or written a story about a secret castle. With any luck, the third story would be so good Bree would forget about the first two. He looked at his feet, wanting this whole event to end as soon as possible.

Sofia cleared her throat again and began reading.

Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom, there lived two brothers who liked to tell stories. Everyone in their village loved to hear their stories and thought the brothers were very creative, but the brothers had a secret. The stories they shared with their village didn't come from them, but from someone else.

Conner's eyes shot straight up toward Sofia. There was something very familiar about this story—something *too* familiar.

Every day the brothers traveled into the forest where they would meet a beautiful fairy. Each time they met, the fairy gave the brothers a new story to share with the people in their village. The fairy lived in a Secret Castle far away from anywhere man had ever been, and her stories were usually about one of the many magical creatures that lived with her in the castle. The brothers were very grateful to

the fairy and never told a soul that she and her castle were real.

Conner could feel his heart beating in the back of his throat. He was listening so intently he forgot about everyone in the crowd around him. Many troubling thoughts filled his head as the story became more familiar. Had the Brothers Grimm staged this whole event to come clean about the origin of their stories? Were they about to admit to the world that the Fairy Godmother was real and had supplied them with their greatest work?

One day the king got word of the brothers' stories. The king was very smart and had a hunch that there was truth to their tales. He had his soldiers follow the brothers into the forest the next time they met the fairy, and their secret was unveiled. The king ordered the brothers to come to see him at his palace and demanded that they take him and his army to the Secret Castle where the fairy lived so they could conquer it.

The brothers pleaded with the king, and told him they didn't know where the Secret Castle was. The king showed them no mercy and said that if they didn't supply him with directions to the Secret Castle he would have everyone in their village killed.

Not wanting to trouble the fairy who had been so kind to them, the brothers asked a great magical bird that also lived at the Secret Castle for help. The magical bird gave the brothers a map to give the king, showing a way to the Secret Castle. But what the king didn't know was that this map was of an enchanted path; it would take him and his army of thousands two hundred years to reach the Secret Castle.

The magical bird assured the brothers that by the time the king and his army arrived at the Secret Castle, it would be prepared to face them. The brothers gave the map to the king and he and his army immediately began their quest to find the Secret Castle.

With the king and his army gone, the brothers' village was saved from the greedy king's wrath. However, the brothers never saw the magical bird or the fairy again. As time went by, the brothers worried that the magical bird, being old and careless, would forget to warn

the other magical creatures in the Secret Castle that the army was coming. So the brothers decided to write their last known story themselves and they knew it would be the most important one they would ever tell.

The brothers wrote a story similar to their own lives, about a Secret Castle and magical creatures and a greedy king who wanted to conquer it all. They spread the story across the land, from one generation to the next, hoping the tale would eventually reach someone who would recognize it for what it really was—not a fairy tale, but a warning in disguise.

There was a long pause before the crowd realized the story was over. Their applause was as confused as their expressions—it seemed like such an odd, unfinished story.

"That is all there is, I'm afraid," Sofia said. "I certainly hope the Secret Castle was warned of the approaching army. Perhaps the Brothers Grimm purposely left their last story unfinished, so that we would all finish it ourselves in our own imaginations. Now I will read the story in French.…"

Conner felt light-headed and sick to his stomach. His mind was racing with so many questions he couldn't focus. He didn't even hear Sofia read the story in French or German; everything was white noise around him. He replayed the story again and again in his head—everything the Brothers Grimm had written in the third story was so obvious and so carefully planned. They were the brothers in their own story, the fairy was Conner's grandmother, the magical bird must be Mother Goose or one of the other fairies, and the Secret Castle was the Land of Stories. And just like in the story, the story wasn't actually a story—it was a warning.

The Brothers Grimm were trying to warn *someone* that *something* was on its way to the Land of Stories. And since they had so carefully planned for the story to be heard two hundred years later, whatever was approaching the Land of Stories must be arriving soon.

It was all so blatant; Conner looked around the crowd hoping to see someone else who had interpreted the story for what it was, but there was no one who had interpreted it like he had. The fairy-tale world was in great danger and he was the only one in the Otherworld who realized it.

“Conner, are you okay?” Bree asked him. “You just went from bright red to pale white in a couple seconds.”

“I’m fine,” Conner lied. “It’s just that story… it was just so strange…”

“Was it coincidentally close to something you were planning on writing?” Bree asked him playfully, but she knew from the look on his face that something was terribly wrong.

Conner was looking right at her, but none of his thoughts had anything to do with her. He didn’t care if she knew he had a crush on her, and he didn’t care if she or the Book Huggers were close to finding the truth about his sister; all he cared about was warning his grandmother and his sister that they were in danger.

Before he knew it, Sofia had finished reading the story in the other languages and the Grimm-Fest had come to an end.

“On behalf of the University of Berlin, I’d like to thank you for joining us today,” Sofia said. “I hope you’ve enjoyed the festivities today as much as I have.”

She placed the third scroll back into the chest the man in lederhosen held for her and together they disappeared into the chapel. The crowd began heading out of the cemetery and Mrs. Peters rallied her group to do the same.

“Wasn’t that a remarkable reading?” Mrs. Peters asked. “I’m certain to remember it for the rest of my life.”

“Mrs. Peters, I’m starving! Can we get something to eat?” Mindy asked.

“Of course,” Mrs. Peters said. “Mrs. Weiss was just recommending we meet up with her and her students at a little café near our hotel if no one objects—”

“Mrs. Peters!” Conner interrupted. “Can I just go back to the hotel? I’m not feeling very well and I think I need to lie down for a bit.”

Mrs. Peters was disappointed but not surprised to hear this given the look on his face. “I’m so sorry, Conner,” she said. “Of course you may. I’ll have the driver drop you off before he takes us to lunch.”

The van couldn’t drive back to the hotel fast enough. Conner even thought about faking a few dry heaves to speed things up. As soon as they pulled up to the hotel Conner jumped out and ran inside before anyone could say good-bye. He zoomed through the lobby, almost knocking into three guests on his way, and ran up the four flights of stairs to his room—he

didn’t want to waste any time waiting for the elevator.

He burst into his room and locked the door behind him. He immediately searched through Betsy until he found his piece of mirror. He impatiently tapped the glass and anxiously waited for it to connect him to his sister. Conner prayed Alex would be available. Unfortunately the only reflection he saw in the mirror was his own.

“Come on, Alex!” Conner said. “You’ve got to answer! Trust me, nothing is more important than this right now!”

He tapped the mirror again and again, trying to reach his sister, with no luck. He spent the rest of the day trying—and still, no result. They were the most frustrating hours of his life. In the evening Conner heard a knock on his door. Mrs. Peters had come to check on him. She and the girls had returned from their bike tour of Tiergarten Park.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Bailey? Any better?” she asked at the door.

“I’m all right, just really nauseated,” Conner told her. “I think I caught a bug at the cemetery.”

“Do I need to call for a doctor?” she asked.

“No, I think I’ll feel better in the morning,” Conner said. “I should be fine as long as I get some sleep.”

“I certainly hope so,” Mrs. Peters said. “I would hate for you to waste your whole trip locked in your hotel room.”

She left him alone to rest, but rest was the last thing Conner got that night. After trying to reach his sister for a couple more hours, he couldn’t stand being in the hotel room any longer. He couldn’t sit around while he knew something very wrong was going on somewhere.

Conner decided to go back to the cemetery, for clarity if not for answers. He grabbed his coat and quietly left his room. He took the stairs again, trying to avoid as many people as possible. He snagged a map from the pamphlet rack in the hotel lobby and followed it all the way back to the cemetery. It took him an hour to walk there in the dark, and to make matters worse it also started to rain.

When he reached St. Matthäus-Kirchhof cemetery all the posters had been taken off the gate and all the guests were gone. It was so much more peaceful now that it was empty. He retraced his steps to the modest graves of the Brothers Grimm. The ground around the graves was littered with flowers and gifts from the attendees of the readings earlier that day.

Conner squinted at the graves as if he were looking not at two big blocks of stone but rather two very silent people.

“So that was some story,” he said to the graves. “Was there anything else you failed to mention? Were there any clues you forgot to include?”

The rain increased with Conner’s frustration. He was actually upset that the graves weren’t responding.

“What army is approaching the fairy-tale world? Where did it come from? Are my grandmother and my sister in danger? Please, I need to know,” Conner said, this time asking the rainy sky above him.

Unfortunately, there was no sign for Conner to witness. He had to rely solely on what his gut was telling him. Conner knew he had been meant to be in the cemetery earlier that day, he had been meant to hear and correctly interpret the story, and now he was meant to warn the fairy-tale world of the approaching danger.

He just didn’t know how.

CHAPTER SIX

QUEEN RED'S HOUSE OF PROGRESS

The Fairy Inaugural Ball was just a day away but it was only one of the major things occupying Alex's mind. As soon as she'd agreed to go on a walk with Rook, she found herself juggling two fixations at the same time. One minute she was obsessing about what to wear and how to behave at the ball, and the next she was daydreaming about how wonderful or tragic her walk might be. It was an exhausting and constant balancing act between the two worries.

On the one hand she was thankful to have two subjects on her mind, as each distracted her from the other; on the other hand Alex would have given anything just to clear her mind for a moment or two. Alex thought the best way to deal with the stress of the two pending events would be to get away from reminders of both, so she happily took Red's offer to meet the morning after Jack and Goldilocks's wedding.

It was a bright sunny morning when Alex and Cornelius journeyed into the Red Riding Hood Kingdom. They traveled northwest, around the Troll and Goblin Territory—or Troblin Territory as it was now called—and soon the tiny kingdom came into view.

A high wall was being constructed around the kingdom. Dozens and dozens of stonemasons worked tirelessly on it, building it up brick by brick. From the looks of it, the new wall would be exactly like the old one, which the Enchantress had eliminated.

Alex and Cornelius had no trouble at all crossing into the kingdom. Many of the guards at the south gate even bowed to Alex, recognizing her as an acquaintance of the queen. Cornelius regally trotted through the rural hills of Bo Peep Family Farms, showing off for all the livestock they passed, and went to the town in the center of the kingdom, where Queen Red's castle stood.

The town was as delightful as when Alex saw it for the first time with her brother. It was a friendly and picturesque village with many shops,

barns, houses, and landmarks. A baker stood outside his shop sharing trays of free samples with the townspeople moving past. A locksmith had a table set up outside his store and demonstrated how he made keys to a crowd of onlookers. Farmers pulled their stubborn animals and children through the streets as they went about their day.

The Red Riding Hood Kingdom had recovered handsomely from the turmoil the Enchantress had caused.

“Excuse me? Do you know where the House of Progress is?” Alex asked a shepherd passing by.

“It’s across from the castle at the other end of the park,” the shepherd told her.

“Thank you,” Alex said, and followed his directions. She had been to the castle many times and it was easy for her to steer Cornelius there.

The House of Progress looked just like a miniature version of the US Capitol, except it had been painted red and the dome had been replaced with the world’s largest square basket.

“That is *so* Red Riding Hood,” Alex said, and shook her head. Even Cornelius moved his head back and forth at the ridiculous sight.

They traveled through the park and Alex left Cornelius at the foot of the building’s wide front steps. Statues of Queen Red posing heroically in her favorite outfits lined the steps all the way up to the doorway. Alex couldn’t believe this was the woman she had come all this way to get advice from, but at least the journey had gotten her out of the Fairy Kingdom.

The House of Progress’s entrance hall was decorated with dozens of paintings of the young queen. Alex was used to Red’s narcissistic decorating by now and it didn’t faze her, but there were two incredibly large paintings on the walls that made her laugh. One was of Red regally speaking to her people just before setting sail on the enormous flying ship the *Granny.* The other was a painting depicting the moment when Red refused to surrender her kingdom to the Enchantress.

Alex had been around for both of those moments and didn’t remember either one as dramatic as the paintings suggested, but she thought they were amusing nonetheless. In the very center of the entrance hall was another statue of Red, but of epic proportions: Queen Red sitting on her throne, looking exactly like the Lincoln Memorial.

“I’ve got to stop showing Red pictures of the Otherworld,” Alex said

under her breath.

A line of waiting townspeople started in the entrance hall, curved around the giant statue, and ended just before the open doorway to the next room. Alex followed the line and found herself stepping into a large circular room directly under the building's gigantic basket.

"ALEX, LOOK OUT!" Red shouted from the back of the room.

The next thing Alex knew, she was being tackled to the ground by an enormous black wolf. Her wand was knocked out of her hand and it rolled away from her. The wolf pressed his massive paws against her chest near her throat. He opened his large snout and Alex could see all the sharp teeth inside his mouth. She closed her eyes as tight as possible, knowing what was coming next.

Alex felt the wolf's wide wet tongue lick her face over and over again—he was so excited to see her.

"Hello, Clawdius," Alex grunted under him. "It's nice to see you again."

"No, Clawdius! What did I say about tackling guests?" Red yelled.

A handful of Red's guards who had been standing along the edge of the room tried to remove the wolf from the young fairy but he growled viciously at them and they quickly backed away.

"Clawdius! Get off the heir of magic right now!" Red demanded.

Clawdius immediately jumped off Alex. Clearly Red was the only one who could control him. Alex got to her feet and Clawdius put his overgrown head in her hand so she would pet him.

"Look how big you've gotten, Clawdius!" Alex said as she scratched under his chin. "You get bigger every time I see you."

Clawdius retrieved Alex's wand, but when she went to take it from his mouth he pulled away—he wanted to play.

"Oh no, Clawdius," Alex said in a panic. "That's not something we can play with!"

"Clawdius, drop the nice fairy's wand right now!" Red ordered, but the wolf ignored her. *"I said, drop it! Don't make me shake the can full of coins!"*

Clawdius sat down and set the wand gently on the floor in front of Alex. Even when seated he was almost as tall as she was. Alex collected her wand and headed to the back of the room where Red sat.

Red was perched on a raised throne and dressed to the nines in a red ball

gown and a tiara; she was drenched in diamonds. To her right were two rows of raised seats where nine people and animals alike sat, although the seats weren't raised as high as hers, of course. Alex assumed these must be the representatives Red had been talking about yesterday.

Alex immediately recognized the three sitting closest to Red as Red's granny; the Little Old Woman who ran the Shoe Inn; and the third Little Pig. There were also three blindfolded white mice who shared one seat, a bushy-haired black sheep; a nervous and jumpy young woman; and an obese man who wore a guilty expression as he ate a pie.

"Everyone, this is my good friend Alex," Red said. "Alex, let me introduce you to my House of Progress representatives: the Honorable Three Blind Mice, Sir BaaBaa Blacksheep, Lady Muffet, and Sir Jack Horner. And of course you know Granny, the Old Woman from the Shoe Inn, and the third Little Pig."

They all greeted her with warm welcomes, except the Old Woman, who was infamously hard of hearing.

"Who's complex?" the Old Woman asked.

"Not complex—*Alex*," Granny said directly into her friend's ear. "She's one of Red's friends."

"Wonderful to meet you all," Alex said. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not at all," Red said. "We're just waiting for Charlie to arrive before we begin our weekly open-house meeting. I'm sure you saw all the townspeople lined up—they love coming to the House of Progress and voicing their concerns. I've become very good at figuring out ways to help the people; it's like a little game."

Just then they heard footsteps and saw Froggy entering the room carrying a large stack of papers. "Good afternoon, everyone," he kindly greeted the representatives. "And hello, Alex! I wasn't expecting to see you —*huuuh!*"

Clawdius tackled Froggy as soon as he came into the room. This was just how the wolf seemed to greet people. All of Froggy's papers flew into the air.

"Clawdius, I just saw you not twenty minutes ago—you have to stop this madness," Froggy grunted, pushing the wolf off him. "We need to start chaining him down!"

“I tried that but he ate through the chain.” Red shrugged. “*Clawdius, come here, boy! Come to Mommy!”*

Clawdius ran to Red’s side and happily plopped his big head in her lap. Froggy collected his papers but they were all disorganized now.

“Come sit by me, Alex,” Red said, and patted the armrest of her throne. “We have so much to talk about!”

“Are you sure it’s all right to visit during the open-house meeting?” Alex asked, taking a seat.

“Oh, it’s more than fine,” Red assured her. “Charlie leads the meetings while I supervise. They’ll get my attention if they need me.”

Froggy took his place at the front of the room and the meeting began. “Forgive me but the open-house forms you filled out prior to arriving are a little jumbled,” he apologized to the townspeople. “So when it’s your turn I’ll need you to step forward and state your name and the nature of the pressing matter that you’d like us to deal with.”

One by one, the townspeople stepped forward and told Froggy and the representatives about their dilemmas. Froggy and the representatives talked about the matter among themselves and then presented the villager with the best solution possible. It was a very nice process for Alex to witness; Froggy and the representatives genuinely seemed passionate about helping the townspeople.

“Wonderful, everything is going just splendidly,” Red said, and then allowed Alex to become her sole focus. “Let’s talk about your date this evening—have you picked out an outfit to wear? If not, I have a little pink dress somewhere in one of my closets that would look divine on you.”

“I was thinking I would just wear this,” Alex said, and gestured to the sparkling dress she wore every day. “I think he’d appreciate it if I just dressed as myself.”

“Be careful of *that*,” Red warned her. “Some of the best advice Granny ever gave me was never to be myself when meeting someone for the first time—you don’t want to scare them away.”

Alex thought about this for a moment. She was pretty sure Granny had meant that as advice for Red personally, not in general.

“He’s a farmer’s son,” Alex said. “I’m afraid doing or saying anything over-the-top may scare him away just as easily. I’d rather he feels comfortable with me than intimidated by me.”

“That may be, but you shouldn’t make him feel too good about himself on the first date,” Red instructed. “Men must always think they’re inferior to you, otherwise they don’t leave you any room to train them.”

Froggy interrupted their conversation momentarily. “Darling, this man is from the south part of town,” he said about the townsman standing in the middle of the room. “Apparently the south path has become so bumpy it’s ruining all the carts that travel on it. They need a new path to be paved.”

“Great, then pave a new one,” Red said with a big smile.

“Unfortunately, they don’t have the funds for it and the kingdom’s pockets will be shallow until the new wall is built,” Froggy explained. “What should the representatives and I suggest?”

Red knew just the thing. She took the diamond bracelet off her left wrist and tossed it to the man from the South Village. “Here, sell this and use the money to pave a new path; it should be more than enough.”

The man was stunned the queen would give him something so valuable. Tears came to his eyes. “Thank you, Your Majesty! Thank you so kindly!” he said on his way out the door.

“You’re very welcome!” Red said, then turned quickly back to Alex. “So where are you and Rook going on a walk to?”

“I’m not sure,” Alex said. “I was just planning on following him.”

Red shook her head. “Whatever you do, do not let him lead the walk,” she said. “Men are natural-born leaders and it’s our job as women to rid them of that animalistic trait. If you let him lead the first walk, soon he’ll be leading the whole relationship.”

“So is it a good sign if he wants *me* to lead the walk?” Alex asked.

“No, that’s even worse!” Red said. “That means he’s got no confidence and expects you to do all the work and hold his hand the rest of his life. You’re way too young for that, Alex.”

Alex scrunched her forehead. Red was only making matters more confusing for her. “Do you really believe this advice, Red?” she asked.

“Oh, none of this stuff pertains to *me*,” Red said. “I’m just looking out for *you*.”

“Darling,” Froggy interrupted again. “This woman is from the east part of town. She’s a baker whose husband died a few years ago. She makes a decent living, but not enough to take care of her four children on her own.”

Tears were streaming down the poor baker’s face. She was clearly

ashamed to be standing before them asking for help.

“There, there,” Red said sympathetically. “There is no reason to cry! We all need a helping hand every now and then—especially me. I’m useless without my staff.”

The queen scanned the dozen or so remaining townspeople in the line. She saw a frail and sad-looking man holding a pitchfork in the very back. “Excuse me, sir, are you a farmer?” she asked him.

The man was shocked his queen was speaking to him directly. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he said with a quick bow.

“Let me guess, you’re here because you can no longer afford to feed your family, am I correct?” Red asked.

“Why, *yes,* Your Majesty,” he said, amazed she could tell so easily.

“Oh wonderful,” Red said happily. Everyone in the room gave her a strange look. “Oh, I didn’t mean *that* was wonderful, I meant it’s wonderful that you’re a farmer because I believe you and this baker can help each other out. Do you have cows on your farm?”

The farmer nodded. “Yes, I have six cows,” he said.

“Terrific.” Red then looked back to the baker. “I assume a financial burden for you is the cost of milk? Am I right?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the tearful baker admitted.

“Then that’s solved,” Red said with a gleeful clap. “The farmer will supply the baker with as much milk as she needs and in return she will provide food for his family. Does that work for everyone?”

The farmer and the baker looked at each other and smiled; Queen Red had given them both a solution. Froggy and Alex exchanged a smile of their own—Red may have been clueless most of the time but when she was good she was *good.*

Froggy continued the open-house meeting and Red continued chatting with Alex.

“Now, if he wants to go on a second walk with you, you must act like you’re too busy,” Red said.

“Why?” Alex asked.

“To keep him grateful for your company,” Red said as if it was obvious.

A hurried set of footsteps echoed through the room. A woman was causing quite a commotion as she entered, pushing past all the townspeople waiting in line. It had been such a pleasant day until this; the disturbance

caught everyone's attention, especially Red's.

"Excuse me, you have to wait your turn," Froggy politely told the woman.

"I didn't come here to ask for any favors," the woman said as she stepped before them. "I've come here to make an announcement."

She was a very beautiful and determined young woman, who seemed to be about the same age as Red. She had pale skin, blue eyes, and dark hair that was tucked underneath a yellow bonnet. She wore a matching yellow ruffled dress with a blue sash and carried a white shepherd's staff. She was the most stylish shepherdess Alex had ever laid eyes on.

"Who are you?" Froggy asked her. He was fairly new to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom and didn't recognize her.

"I'm Little Bo Peep, owner of the Bo Peep Family Farms," she declared.

A hush fell over the room. Little Bo Peep was a very powerful and respected member of the community. It was only on rare occasions that she was seen outside her farms. The townspeople and representatives knew there must be a very important reason she had come to the House of Progress today.

Queen Red eyed her up and down, and left to right. She refused to be intimidated by anyone in her own house. "Thank you for joining us, Little Bo," she said. "What brings you to the House of Progress today?"

Little Bo smiled. "To put it simply, I've come here before you today to challenge Queen Red for the throne of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom."

Everyone gasped. Never in the history of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom had someone so openly disrespected the queen. Little Bo smiled snidely at their reaction.

At this bold declaration, Red stood up from her throne. "*How dare you,*" she said coldly. "You think you can just walk into *my* House of Progress and threaten the throne of *my* kingdom? You're lucky I don't have you immediately locked up!"

"You think this is *your* kingdom?" Little Bo said without a trace of fear. "Then you're mistaken, Your Majesty. It may have your name on it but this kingdom belongs to the people. The sole purpose of the C.R.A.W.L. Revolution was to free ourselves from the Evil Queen, who was in power in the Northern Kingdom at the time. Now look at us, a decade and a half later we're standing in one of the many shrines to *another* self-obsessed queen.

Well, I’m sick of it and I’m not alone.”

She reached into the pocket of her dress and removed a scroll that she handed to Froggy.

“This is a petition signed by a hundred other citizens of the kingdom who agree it’s time for a regime change,” Little Bo said. “They also have stated that I am their chosen candidate for a new sovereign. We elected a queen before, we can elect a queen again.”

“This is preposterous,” Froggy said.

“It’s the will of the people, sir,” Little Bo corrected. “Are you going to ignore it—in the House of Progress of all places?”

Froggy looked over the list of names and shared it with the representatives.

“You’re not actually humoring her, are you?” Red yelled, outraged that they would even read such a thing.

“The Little Peep girl has a point, dear,” Granny said.

“Granny, whose side are you on?” Red asked in shock.

“I’ll always be on your side, dear,” Granny said. “But it’s the people who gave you your throne, so if the people want to give it to someone else now, they have the right to do so.”

All the other representatives seemed to agree with her; even the Three Blind Mice nodded along and they couldn’t read the names on the scroll.

“What makes you think you’re qualified to lead this country?” Red asked Little Bo.

“My farms make up over seventy percent of the kingdom and produce over eighty percent of the goods we trade with other kingdoms,” Little Bo proclaimed. “Only for you to take ninety percent of those profits and use it to build castles and statues of yourself.”

Red’s nostrils flared. “Which keeps many builders and artists employed throughout the kingdom,” she said in defense.

“Yes, but as you can see, there are no builders or artists seeking aid in this room,” Little Bo pointed out. “I believe there is a more responsible way this kingdom can be managed that will benefit everyone equally—and I believe I am the woman to do it.”

The townspeople and representatives began whispering among themselves. Red could sense some of them were starting to agree with Bo Peep.

“So what do you want, Little Bo?” Red said, crossing her arms. “You can’t just waltz in here and demand to be queen.”

Sir BaaBaa raised a hoof to join the conversation. “We could have another election.”

Red was staring daggers at him. “Oh how typical, the *sheep* wants Little Bo Peep to run for queen. That’s partisanship if I ever saw it.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Granny said. “An election would give the people of this kingdom a way to express their will.”

“And what if I don’t allow an election?” Red said. “I’m still the queen, after all. The last time I checked, my word was still the law.”

Little Bo stepped even closer to her throne. “Then you would be proving to your kingdom that you are no different from the Evil Queen, and the next revolution that breaks out will be against *you*.”

The statement was meant to scare Red and it worked. “So be it,” Red said. “We’ll humor this shepherdess with a little election. But if I recall, Little Bo, you have a reputation of not being able to find your own sheep, so I doubt you’ll be able to find support that rivals mine. I was elected queen after the C.R.A.W.L. Revolution and I will be elected queen again.”

“Then I’ll see you at the polls, Your Majesty,” Little Bo said with a coy smile. She turned on her heel and promptly left the House of Progress.

Red re-seated herself on the throne. Her cheeks were bright pink and a concerned scowl was frozen on her face. Alex had never seen her look so distraught. The thought of losing her throne had always been Red’s greatest fear—but the idea that she might lose it to the people’s will was obviously almost unbearable to her.

Alex couldn’t imagine Red as anything but a queen. She put a hand on her friend’s shoulder, wishing she had words to comfort her with.

Froggy ran up to the throne and kneeled at her side. “Are you all right, my dear?”

“Splendid, just splendid,” Red said. She stared at the floor, quietly plotting her next move. “If it’s an election that sheepherder wants, it’s an election she’ll get.”

Chapter Seven

LITTLE BO PEEPING

Alex left Red's House of Progress, grateful to return to her own problems. The anxiety she felt about the Fairy Inaugural Ball and the walk with Rook was heavy to carry around, but not *life altering* like Red's afternoon had become, although Alex had a sneaking suspicion Red would find a way to drag her into the drama.

That evening Alex went to the field beyond the gardens to meet Rook. She was positive she arrived at the exact time they had agreed to meet but when she got there Rook was nowhere in sight. Alex sat on a boulder by the stream and waited patiently for him—or at least she thought she was being patient.

Every second waiting for Rook felt like a minute and every minute felt like an hour. The more she waited the more her head filled with doubts. Where was he? What was taking him so long? Had he forgotten about their walk? Had he changed his mind and decided not to come? Had she been stood up?

In between the negative thoughts she self-consciously straightened her headband or fixed a crease in her dress. After only five minutes of waiting Alex had convinced herself Rook wasn't coming. What was she going to tell Red the next time she saw her? How was she supposed to trust another boy again? How could she live with the embarrassment?

Just when she was about to call it a day and return to the Fairy Palace, she heard rustling in the woods beyond the field. Rook stepped into view, looking as happy, excited, and dreamy as ever.

"Hello, Alex!" Rook said with a big smile.

"Hi, Rook!" Alex said, and let out a relaxed sigh. Just seeing him had instantly switched off all the negative thoughts multiplying in her head. She had stressed herself out for no reason.

Neither knew if they should hug or shake hands or something else, so they stood a few feet apart and silently looked at each other for a moment.

It was an awkward hello.

“How was your day?” Alex said, breaking the silence.

“It was pretty normal,” Rook said. “I was planting carrots.”

“How nice!” Alex said, as if it was the most fascinating thing she had heard in weeks.

Rook nodded. “I’m a good gardener,” he said. “My secret is singing. I’ve discovered if I sing to the crops, they grow much healthier.” Rook’s eyes suddenly widened. “Oh no, I hope you find that charming and not crazy.… It’s not like I have conversations with them or anything.…”

Alex giggled. “Oh please, where I live, the plants often sing *back*.”

Rook was relieved to hear this. “So… where would you like to take a walk to?” he asked.

“I was planning to follow you,” Alex said. She wasn’t obeying any of Red’s advice and she knew Red would have killed her for saying that she’d follow Rook.

“Well, there’s a trail through the woods that I know pretty well,” Rook said.

“Terrific,” Alex said.

They journeyed into the trees and found a small dirt path that snaked deeper into the woods. It wasn’t a very scenic route but it didn’t matter; their walk was more about getting to know each other. However, they were both afraid to be the first to say something to the other.

“What if we take turns asking each other questions?” Rook suggested. “This is going to be a very quiet walk unless we start talking about something. Or we could play charades.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Alex said. “But you go first.”

“Oh, you’re making *me* go first?” Rook said playfully. “All right, here’s one—how long have you been practicing magic?”

“Less than a year, actually,” Alex said. “Everyone says I’ve been learning very quickly, though. I didn’t even know I was a fairy until I was twelve.”

“Really?” Rook said. “How did you find out?”

“It’s a long story,” Alex said bashfully.

“Good thing we picked a long path,” Rook said with a wink that made her melt inside.

Alex decided to tell him the shortest version of the story she could. “My

twin brother and I grew up in a place very far away and different from all of this," she explained. "Our dad grew up here and felt that magic ruined people. He thought it made them lazy and entitled. He wanted us to learn how to take care of our problems without relying on magic. Then when we were twelve—well, to make a long story short, we followed our grandmother home one day and discovered who we really were."

Rook's eyebrows were raised so high they disappeared into his floppy hair. "That's incredible," he said. "No wonder you're so different from all the other fairies. What does your father think of you now?"

"I wouldn't know," Alex said sadly. "He died shortly before our eleventh birthday. He never got the chance to tell us the truth himself."

Rook nodded. "I'm very sorry to hear that. He must have been a very smart man to raise a daughter like you."

"Thank you," Alex said. She quickly straightened her headband to distract him from her blushing face.

"Is your brother a fairy, too?" Rook asked.

Alex couldn't help but laugh. "Conner? A fairy? Oh, heavens no. Being a fairy was the last thing he ever wanted to be. He still lives back home with our mom and stepdad. I think he'd be really good at magic if he ever tried, though."

"What about your grandmother? Does she live in the Fairy Kingdom with you?" Rook asked.

It took Alex a moment to respond. She hadn't realized how little he knew about her; it was really refreshing. He must have genuinely liked Alex for *her* and not who she was *going to be.*

"She does," Alex said. She wasn't sure how he would react to hearing who her grandmother was and she wasn't sure she was ready for him to know. "Now it's my turn to ask you a question. How old are you?"

Rook had to think about his answer. "I'm fifteen, but technically I'm one hundred and fifteen."

At first Alex thought he was joking and gave a small laugh, but when he didn't laugh with her she realized he was being serious. "Oh my goodness, because of the one-hundred-year sleeping curse!" She figured it out. "You must have been a toddler when it was cast."

"I was very young," he said. "I don't remember much about it. I was playing outside when suddenly for no reason I went to sleep. Then my dad

and I woke up one hundred years later."

"What about your mother?" Alex asked. "What happened to her?"

Rook paused for a second before explaining. "It was my birthday and my mother and brother were in a field collecting berries for a special dessert they were making that night. The field was just outside the border of the Eastern Kingdom, so when the sleeping spell was cast it didn't reach them. By the time my father and I woke up… they were gone."

Alex placed a hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry, Rook," she said. "It never occurred to me that families were separated because of the curse."

"Many people don't realize that," Rook said. "They just assume everyone went to sleep and awoke to their normal lives a hundred years later, but our whole lives changed when we awoke. I'd be lying if I didn't tell you I was happy to hear Ezmia had been killed. It brought a lot of closure for me. I don't think my father will ever be the same, though. That's why he hates fairies so much; he blames them for not being able to stop the curse."

Alex nodded. "I understand him a little better now." She wondered how Rook and Farmer Robins would take knowing she was the one who had defeated the Enchantress. Would it make them like her any more? Or would she just become a living reminder of what they had lost?

"My mother and brother took care of us for as long as they could while we slept," Rook went on. "They wrote us letters every day and left them for us to read when the curse was eventually broken. I'll read one or two when I find myself missing them the most. It makes it feel like they're still around."

Alex understood this more than he knew. One of the reasons she felt so comfortable in the Land of Stories was because everything there reminded Alex of her dad and made missing him less painful.

"My turn to ask you another question," Rook said, changing the subject. "How was your day? Tell me everything you did."

Alex didn't know where to begin. "Well, it started out very nice," she said. "I went to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom to visit Queen Red—we're old friends, believe it or not—but then the day took a very bizarre turn."

"What happened?"

"Her throne was challenged by Little Bo Peep," Alex told him. "She managed to convince everyone they should have an election for a new

leader.”

Rook was so intrigued his whole face lit up. “That’s unbelievable,” he said. “What would make her do that? I always thought Queen Red was loved by her people.”

“Not by everyone, it seems,” Alex said. “Apparently Little Bo has been unhappy for a long time with the way the kingdom has been managed and thinks she would be a much better queen. I would never want Red to lose her throne but I honestly think Little Bo had some valid things to say.”

Rook scrunched his forehead and thought more about it. “What would you say possessed Little Bo to challenge the throne today of all days? If she’s been unhappy for so long you’d think she would have done something about it sooner.”

Alex thought back to the scene Little Bo had caused earlier that day in the House of Progress but couldn’t come up with an answer. “That’s a really good point,” she said. “She didn’t mention anything in particular. But something must have provoked her into demanding an election.”

“Seems fishy, if you ask me,” Rook said. He abruptly stopped walking and a sly smile crept over his face.

“What is it?” Alex asked, looking back at him.

“I just thought of something really adventurous we could do,” he said, but then quickly said, “Never mind, it might not be your cup of tea.”

Alex laughed—if he only knew the mischief she and her brother had gotten into over the years. “I’ll have you know I happen to be *very* adventurous,” she teased. “Don’t let the wand and sparkly dress fool you.”

Rook shook his head. “I don’t want to be a bad influence, especially to an up-and-coming fairy. It could get us both into a lot of trouble.”

Alex was appreciative of this but was even more curious about what he was getting at. “Then tonight I’ll just be *Alex*,” she said. “What’s on your mind?”

Rook laughed at her and caved in. “All right, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He chuckled. “I was just going to suggest that if you’re curious about Little Bo Peep’s intentions, we could sneak onto her farm and have a look around. I know right where it is—it’s on the southeast side of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom, not too far from our farm. Her farmhands sold my father some sheep once.”

Alex’s conscience instantly shot down the idea. As a respected fairy, it

would be extremely irresponsible and childish of her to spy on Little Bo Peep. She would never want to do anything that could potentially jeopardize her reputation. But the answer she gave Rook took them both by surprise.

"Let's do it!"

Rook was shocked. He had been half kidding but the excitement in Alex's eyes was contagious. "Are you sure you're up for it? I'm not pressuring you, am I?"

In truth, the only thing pressuring Alex was Alex herself. It felt like ages since she'd experienced a true adventure. She craved the fear of getting caught and missed the thrill of being chased.

"Let's ride Cornelius," Alex said. "It'll take us a quarter of the time to get there."

She confidently turned around and headed back to the field. Rook froze for a moment before catching up with her—he liked her more and more with every moment they spent together. When they returned to the field Alex whistled for Cornelius and he appeared shortly after.

"Good evening, Cornelius," Alex said. "Rook and I are going to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom to spy on someone. Care to join us in a little mischief tonight?"

Cornelius was just as surprised as Rook had been. He had never seen this side of Alex before, but he liked it. He nodded his huge head as if to say, *"I thought you'd never ask."*

Alex and Rook climbed astride the unicorn and the three took off toward the Red Riding Hood Kingdom. By the time they reached the kingdom's partially built wall, the sun had set and the moon was aglow in a twinkly night sky. All the stonemasons had gone home for the night, so Alex and Rook didn't have to worry about being seen entering the kingdom.

Rook jumped off Cornelius's back and began climbing the unfinished wall. "It's a little tricky but I think you'll manage in that dress of yours," Rook called down to Alex.

Alex didn't even bother trying to climb it. She removed her wand from the pocket of her dress and pointed it directly at the wall. A doorway appeared immediately and Alex effortlessly walked through it and into the kingdom.

"Oh, now you're just showing off," Rook said to her, and climbed down

to meet her.

Cornelius tried to walk through the doorway but couldn't fit.

"Stay on the other side of the wall, Cornelius," Alex said. "We'll be back soon."

The unicorn slumped. He was disappointed he wasn't going with them but patiently waited as Alex requested. Rook took Alex by the hand and led her through the grassy hills of the Bo Peep Farms. It was the first time a boy had ever held her hand. She felt like her heart was doing cartwheels into her stomach.

About a mile past the wall, the rooftops of Little Bo Peep's quaint farm came into view in the distance. It was an adorable place and reminded Alex of a play set she and her brother had when they were toddlers. The barn was big and painted bright red with white trim. The farmhouse was wooden and small, the perfect size for one person, and had a wraparound porch. A metal windmill stood between the buildings, slowly turning in the night breeze.

Huge stacks of hay were scattered across the land and there were fluffy black and white sheep as far as the eye could see. It was like the farm was covered in little walking clouds.

When they got closer to the farm Rook pulled Alex behind a haystack to hide from a group of farmhands they saw ahead. The farmhands were collecting their tools and putting them away in the barn. They had finished their work for the day and were preparing to go home.

The front door of the farmhouse suddenly burst open and Little Bo Peep stepped onto the porch. She had taken her bonnet off for the evening and her dark hair was up in a tight bun. She wore a long blue cloak over her yellow ruffled dress and held her staff in one hand and a lantern in the other. Her pale skin glowed in the moonlight.

At first Little Bo appeared to be in a hurry, but she stayed on the porch once she realized the farmhands were still there.

"Good night, Miss Peep!" the farmhands called to her.

"Good night, gentlemen, thank you for all your hard work today!" Little Bo said back. "See you in the morning."

The farmhands tipped their hats to her and all climbed into the same wagon and drove off into the night. Little Bo smiled and waved to them, but once they were out of sight her smile faded into a somber expression. She did a full circle around the porch, scanning the farm to make absolutely

certain that she was alone.

Once she was sure that every farmhand had left, Little Bo hurried down the steps of the porch and headed straight to the barn. She pulled open the heavy red doors and shut them behind her. Alex and Rook heard a scrape as Little Bo locked them from the inside.

“What do you think she’s up to?” Alex whispered.

“Let’s find out.” Rook gestured for her to follow him.

They sprinted to the barn as quickly, as quietly, and as low to the ground as possible. Alex kept tripping over her dress and Rook had to help her up each time. They were both laughing and kept reminding each other to stay quiet. Alex couldn’t remember the last time she had had this much fun.

They circled the barn until they found an open window. They slowly peeked over the windowsill to see inside.

The barn was lined with mountainous stacks of square hay bales. Little Bo was standing before the largest stack, in the middle of the barn, tirelessly pulling the bales down one square at a time. She grunted and dabbed her forehead with the corner of her cloak. Eventually, a large rectangular object covered with a sheet was revealed. Little Bo had been hiding something in the hay.

She yanked off the sheet covering the object and Alex had to put a hand over her mouth to keep from gasping out loud.

“That’s a magic mirror!” Alex whispered. “Little Bo Peep is hiding a magic mirror in her barn!”

“Are you sure it’s magic?” Rook asked.

“I’m positive.” The mirror had a thick silver frame with floral engravings and its reflection was too crisp to be a normal mirror’s.

Little Bo examined herself in the mirror, fixing a few strands of hair that had fallen into her face. Once she was satisfied with her appearance, she gently placed an open hand on the glass. The mirror instantly rippled to life like a stone had been dropped in a still lake.

Little Bo leaned as close to the mirror as she could without touching it. “Are you there, my love?” she whispered softly. Her eyes were wide and anxious as she waited. She looked like a puppy waiting for its master to arrive.

A dark silhouette of a man appeared through the rippling glass. “I am,” his deep and gruff voice declared.

Little Bo smiled and pressed both of her hands against the glass. “I missed you so much today,” she said. “I would have come sooner but the farmhands were working late.”

“How did it go at the House of Progress?” the man asked.

“Everything went exactly as we planned,” Little Bo was happy to share. “I wish you could have been there to hear me; I was very convincing. No one would have thought I was anything but genuinely passionate about the kingdom.”

“Good,” the man said. “Make sure to keep it that way.”

The man’s harsh tone made Little Bo blue. “What’s wrong? You don’t seem yourself,” she said, and peered closer into the glass to see his silhouette better.

“Every day I’m trapped in here is harder than the one before,” he said. “I’m starting to have doubts that I’ll ever be free.”

“You don’t trust me?” Little Bo said sadly.

“I trust your intentions, my sweet, but until you’re crowned queen I can’t get my hopes up,” he said. “Misery fills the emptiness that hope leaves behind when the world disappoints you.”

Little Bo passionately pressed her body against the glass. “I will find a way to get you out of there, if it’s the last thing I do,” she said. “Soon I’ll be queen and I’ll have a world of opportunity at my disposal. I’ll exhaust every resource in my power until I have you in my arms again.”

The silhouette went silent. “We’ll see,” it said coldly.

“You must believe in me,” Little Bo said. “I can’t do this without your trust.”

The silhouette slowly faded away and the mirror’s glass became solid.

“No, come back! Please come back!” Little Bo pleaded but the man did not return.

Little Bo slid down the glass and onto the ground. She sat on her knees and buried her face in her hands, quietly sobbing. Once she stopped crying she stood up and re-covered the mirror and re-stacked the bales of hay to hide it.

“We should head back before she finishes,” Rook suggested.

Alex agreed and they quickly crept away in the direction they’d come from. They stayed quiet until they reached the wall and then returned to the Fairy Kingdom on Cornelius’s back.

As they traveled home on the swift unicorn, Rook asked, “What was Little Bo Peep doing with a magic mirror? And who was that man trapped inside it?”

Alex had been asking herself the same questions. “I have no idea,” she said. “I feel so awful for her. Once someone is trapped in a magic mirror it’s nearly impossible to get them out, and whoever that man was, it looked like Little Bo loved him very much.”

“That’s the real reason she wants to be queen, then,” Rook said. “She thinks if she becomes queen it’ll be easier to find a way to free him.”

“And from the looks of it, that man hasn’t been trapped in the mirror very long,” Alex said. “After a while people imprisoned inside magic mirrors begin to lose themselves—their thoughts and memories fade and eventually all they can do is reflect the world around them. That man’s mind was still pretty intact. He must have been cursed recently and that’s probably what triggered Little Bo’s decision to challenge the throne today.”

“You sure know a lot about magic mirrors,” Rook said.

“I’ve had some experience with them,” Alex said. “And Little Bo’s not the first person to think of a throne as the solution to getting someone out. Not many people know this but the man trapped inside the Evil Queen’s mirror was her beloved, too. Her vanity and all the horrible things she did to Snow White were in one way or another just attempts to save the little of him that was left.”

“Oh, good,” Rook said with a smile in his eyes. “I was afraid you might have a collection of magic mirrors with all the other boys you’ve gone on walks with trapped inside.”

They shared a laugh over the thought. “Stop giving me ideas,” Alex teased. “Besides, you’re the first boy I’ve ever taken a walk with, so my collection would be awfully small.”

Alex’s saying this made Rook feel like the most special boy in the world and the way he looked at Alex made her feel like the most special girl. The closer they got to the Fairy Kingdom, the closer they sat to each other on the unicorn. Soon they reached the field just outside the fairy gardens and Rook helped Alex off Cornelius. They looked into each other’s eyes, knowing their night was coming to an end.

“It’s getting late,” Rook said, looking up at the night sky. “I should go home before my father worries.”

“I had so much fun tonight,” Alex said. “Thank you for taking me on an adventure. I really needed one.”

“When may I see you again?” Rook had been waiting to ask since they left the Red Riding Hood Kingdom. “*If* I may see you again, that is.”

“I’d like that very much,” Alex said. “There’s this fairy ball thing I have to go to tomorrow night but maybe we could see each other again at the end of the week?”

“I can’t wait.” He was looking so deeply into her eyes she felt like he was staring at her soul. He leaned closer to her and her heart began to flutter—was he about to do what she thought? Was she ready for it? But just before their mouths touched, Rook turned from her and began walking in the direction of his home.

“To more adventures,” Rook said.

“To more adventures,” Alex repeated.

“Good night, Alex,” he said as he disappeared into the trees.

Alex sighed and leaned on Cornelius for support. Her heart was beating in time to a glorious symphony that played in her mind. She felt like she was floating above herself. She had never wanted to be with someone as much as she wanted to be with Rook. His presence gave her a purpose she couldn’t explain.

Alex patted Cornelius’s head good night and made her way back to the Fairy Palace. She couldn’t help skipping as she walked; she was full of excitement, giggles, and butterflies.…

Chapter Eight

THE FAIRY INAUGURAL BALL

The day of the Fairy Inaugural Ball finally arrived and the entire Fairy Kingdom was united in celebration. Two years ago, when Alex first laid eyes on the fairy gardens and the Fairy Palace, she never would have thought the kingdom could look *more* magical than it already did. But when she awoke that morning and looked out her window and saw the results of all the hard work the fairies had put into making this day as special as possible, she realized she had been mistaken.

A double rainbow arched high above the kingdom without fading. The fluffiest white clouds imaginable slowly morphed into the shapes of flowers, animals, and insects as they floated through the sky. The air was filled with bubbles of all sizes and some transported the tiniest fairies from one corner of the kingdom to another. Every plant was bigger and brighter than normal and swayed in a light breeze. High geysers shot sporadically out of every pond and lake and never from the same place twice.

The kingdom only became more majestic as the sun set and all the stars appeared. They twinkled vividly in the night sky and with each shooting star a sparkly trail glistened down as if it were raining stardust. The Fairy Palace shimmered brighter than ever, as if it were covered in millions of miniature lights. Fireworks went off in slow motion above the palace, illuminating the gardens and bodies of water in bright colors.

The ball began downstairs in the main hall of the Fairy Palace and the sounds of celebration increased as more and more fairies from around the kingdom arrived. Alex was still in her chambers, too nervous to join the festivities. They were all waiting for *her*, they had all come to see *her*—it was more attention than she was comfortable with.

Alex had been standing in front of her mirror for hours. She magically transformed her dress into several different gowns, each more eccentric than the next, until she finally settled on a simple white gown with matching gloves. She even styled her hair up into a look Queen Red would

have been proud of.

She looked beautiful and, more important, she *felt* beautiful. She wished her six-year-old self could see her now. Alex would have grown up with such confidence had she known this was where she would end up. She just wished her brother and her mom could see her.

The small piece of glass Alex had chipped off her mirror so she could communicate with her brother during his trip had been shimmering non-stop all day. She figured her brother was having the time of his life in Germany and wanted to tell her all about it. Alex couldn't wait to hear about it, but she ignored him, wanting to spare herself from any jokes or sarcastic comments he would make about her dress and the ball tonight—she was dreading it enough as it was.

There was a knock on her door and Tangerina and Skylene walked into her chamber.

"Hello, hello," Tangerina said. "We came to see how you were doing."

"Everyone is waiting for you downstairs," Skylene said.

Alex lost all confidence in her appearance as soon as she saw the enchanted outfits they were wearing. Tangerina was dressed in a square gown made entirely out of honeycomb. Live bees circled her neck and wrists like floating jewelry and honey dripped from her earlobes like teardrop earrings. Skylene wore her long hair up in the shape of a large water lily. Her dress was made of continuously flowing water; it started at her neck and flowed down her body, stopping just before it touched the ground—it was like she was wearing a waterfall.

"You two look amazing," Alex peeped.

"Is *that* what you're wearing?" Skylene asked. She and Tangerina exchanged a look that made Alex feel horribly underdressed.

"It is," Alex said confidently, trying to rebuild her self-esteem. "You both said I should dress as I want to be remembered, right? This gown is elegant but simple and it does its job without being overly flashy and without stealing focus. That's exactly what I'd like my reputation to be."

The fairies just nodded. "It's *cuuute*," Tangerina finally said.

They weren't convincing and made Alex feel more discouraged than ever. "I can't do this," she said, and sat on her bed. "I'm not cut out for this kind of attention or pressure. I'm the kind of girl who just wants to be at the ball, not be the *belle of the ball*."

Tangerina and Skylene sat down on either side of her.

“You’ll have to excuse the kingdom,” Tangerina said. “The last Fairy Inaugural Ball was canceled when we discovered how destructive Ezmia was. It’s been a very long time since we had something or someone worth celebrating. We’re all just very excited, perhaps too excited.”

“I can’t imagine how over-stimulating all this must be for you,” Skylene said. “And I don’t think we’ve been much help. We may have given you the wrong idea about what tonight is truly about.”

“Then I shouldn’t dress how I want to be remembered?” Alex asked.

“Forget what we said about that, Alex,” Tangerina said. “Being a fairy means you must be true to the goodness in your heart, and nothing is truer than wearing your heart on your sleeve.”

“And the more honesty you show in your appearance, the more you will be remembered and admired for it,” Skylene added.

Alex thought about that for a few moments but wasn’t sure she entirely understood. “So I’m supposed to wear my feelings?” she asked.

“So to speak,” Skylene said.

“But if you truly believe this gown represents you, then you should have no regrets wearing this downstairs,” Tangerina said.

“We’ll give you a few moments alone to think it over,” Skylene said. “There’s no rush; come down whenever you’re ready.”

They each patted her on the shoulder and walked to the door.

“Oh, and Alex,” Tangerina said before leaving, “don’t think you’re not worth celebrating.”

The fairies smiled affectionately at Alex as they left her chambers. Alex stood before the mirror again, this time looking into her heart more than at her reflection.

In the past year Alex had experienced so many new phases in her life: living in a different dimension, learning magic, going on walks with boys, and being away from her family for the first time. Everything was as terrifying as it was exciting and Alex wanted her gown to reflect it all.

Alex closed her eyes and thought of the perfect thing to wear. She raised her wand and with a bright flash transformed her dress one last time.…

The main hall of the Fairy Palace was decorated to perfection. The usually golden arches and pillars had been bewitched to change colors as the night went on. A small band of enchanted flutes and strings played music by themselves in the corner. The hall had been cleared out entirely and was lined with tables of food and drinks.

There were hundreds upon hundreds of fairies and not one of them was alike: water fairies sprinkled in dew, garden fairies wrapped in leaves, fairies with large colorful wings, fairies that glowed like they were made entirely of light, and small fairies the size of insects. The majority of them stood around mingling, while others hovered in the air.

The Fairy Godmother was in the center of the party, playing hostess and greeting everyone who came up to her. She was wearing her finest robes, which sparkled like the night sky, and tonight the air around her also sparkled, as if her aura had dressed for the occasion.

Mother Goose and Lester were camped out by one of the drink tables, trying to avoid the other fairies at all costs. Mother Goose poured herself and the large goose goblets of punch and topped them off with a splash from her flask.

Tangerina and Skylene waited by the foot of the stairs for Alex to arrive. “I hope we cheered her up,” Tangerina said. “The poor thing looked terrified.”

“She’ll be down when she’s ready,” Skylene said.

“Oh look! Here she comes now,” Tangerina said, and pointed to the top of the stairs.

Skylene eagerly tapped the side of her glass until the room went silent. “Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we’d like to present the fairy of the hour,” she announced. “She is the youngest fairy to ever join the Fairy Council and the Happily Ever After Assembly, the only fairy clever enough to outsmart the Enchantress, and she’s the future Fairy Godmother! Please give a warm welcome to the one and only Alex Bailey!”

Skylene made a grand gesture toward the top of the stairs and the hall burst into applause. Alex walked down the stairs and the entire room gasped when they saw her gown. She was still wearing the white gown but it was now covered in thousands of vibrant live butterflies. The butterflies twitched and fluttered in time with Alex’s nervous heart but they never flew away.

Tangerina and Skylene were the first to greet Alex and rave about her new dress. Mother Goose and Lester raised their goblets in her direction from the drinks table. The Fairy Godmother smiled proudly up at her from the middle of the room. She met her granddaughter at the foot of the stairs, took her hand, and led her into the center of the hall.

The palace was filled with fairies Alex had never seen before, but besides Tangerina and Skylene, the rest of the Fairy Council members were nowhere to be found.

"Grandma, where is everyone?" Alex asked. "Aren't Rosette, Xanthous, Emerelda, Violetta, and Coral coming to the ball?"

"They'll be here shortly," the Fairy Godmother said. "They're just waiting for us to start."

"Start *what*?" Alex asked, and gave her grandmother a suspicious look.

"You'll see," the Fairy Godmother said, hiding a smile.

Skylene tapped the side of her glass again to regain the crowd's attention. "Tonight we're here to celebrate a girl who over the past few months has shown wisdom and skill beyond her years. However, before she can officially join the Fairy Council and the Happily Ever After Assembly, there are four sacred tests she must pass: the test of *courage*, the test of *grace*, the test of *kindness*, and the test of *heart*."

The butterflies on the inside and outside of Alex fluttered intensely. "Grandma," she said with enormous eyes. "You never said I would be *tested* at the ball."

An amused grin appeared on the Fairy Godmother's face. "I didn't want to worry you," she said. "Just relax, sweetheart, you've already passed the first three without realizing it."

"Please clear the floor!" Skylene said, and the crowd of guests parted to the sides of the room, leaving Alex alone in the center. A bright flash of light filled the back of the hall and seven podiums and a seat on either side of them suddenly appeared. They were the official stations of the Fairy Council members—and if Alex passed the tests, she would be given a seat among them.

Mother Goose was to present the first test. She went to Alex and put an arm around her. "When Alex was thirteen years old she proved her bravery to the world by defeating the evil Enchantress," Mother Goose said to the guests. "Alex was able to do something five queens, four kings, and ten

fairies combined could not; she figured out a way to outwit Ezmia. She didn't care if she lived or died in the process, all she cared about was saving the people she loved. So, Alex, it's my privilege to inform you that, without question, you have passed the test of *courage*."

The fairies applauded and Mother Goose took her seat by the podiums. Once she was seated, four familiar people pushed their way through the crowd of fairies lining the room and stepped into the center of the hall next to Alex—it was the old lady and her three bratty granddaughters whom Alex had helped in the Charming Kingdom.

"Wait, what are they doing here?" Alex asked.

Suddenly, bright lights appeared and began swirling around the woman and her granddaughters. Alex watched in amazement as the woman transformed into Emerelda and the three granddaughters became Rosette, Violetta, and Coral.

"That was you four?" Alex asked in shock, and a smile came to her face.

All four looked as gorgeous as ever. Emerelda wore a long dress made entirely out of small emeralds. Rosette's gown was red and multi-layered, so the bottom of it looked like a giant rose wrapped around her legs. Violetta wore a purple dress with a high collar shaped like a violet. Coral's dress was made of pink flower petals and Fisher, her walking-fish pet, held tightly in her hands, wore a matching bow tie.

"Being a fairy doesn't mean you're always appreciated," Emerelda said. "But even when she was subjected to a rude and unwelcoming home, Alex was able to keep a calm and elegant demeanor. She understands that being a fairy isn't about *whom* you help, but *how* you help. She has passed the test of *grace*."

The fairies around the hall clapped again. Rosette, Tangerina, Emerelda, Skylene, Violetta, and Coral went to their respective podiums—there was only one fairy missing.

Before Alex knew it, Cornelius abruptly galloped into the hall at full speed with Xanthous on his back. They stopped in the center of the room beside her, and Xanthous hopped down from the unicorn.

"Don't tell me *you* were a test, too!" Alex said to her unicorn, and playfully put her hands on her hips. The unicorn happily nodded his giant head.

Xanthous was wearing a crisp yellow suit with a long flickering cape of flames. He addressed the crowd, soaking up the attention for all it was worth. “Of all the unicorns in the forest she could have chosen as her method of transportation, Alex chose *this* one,” he told the crowd.

Cornelius snorted loudly as if to say, *“I have a name.”*

“Alex gave this unicorn a chance to prove himself even when the unicorns of his own herd had disregarded him,” Xanthous continued. “She has proven that she believes passion is far more important than appearance and in doing so has passed the test of *kindness.*”

The fairies cheered again. Cornelius became emotional and had to wipe his eyes on a tablecloth. Xanthous joined the other fairies at the podiums, completing their rainbow of color. The Fairy Godmother was next to approach Alex. The entire hall fell silent, knowing the final test was about to be presented.

“Alex, there is one final test you must complete, and you must complete it in here in front of all of us,” the Fairy Godmother said sternly, although it was mostly for show. “It’s the test of *heart*, and it cannot be proven with a wand, but only with words. Are you ready?”

Alex’s hands were trembling. She had been afraid a moment like this would happen—a moment when she could possibly let down the entire Fairy Kingdom if she failed. Alex licked her lips and nodded. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“In your own words, tell us why you should join the Fairy Council and the Happily Ever After Assembly,” the Fairy Godmother said.

It was difficult for Alex to think with so many pairs of eyes staring at her. She looked inside her heart for the best answer. She thought about all the people she had helped as a fairy and all the people who had ever helped her before she was a fairy. She thought about the fairies around her, and about Farmer Robins and Rook, and tried to form an answer she thought would please them all.

“Because… because…,” Alex said with a nervous quiver. “Because I know what it’s like to live without magic. I know what it’s like to struggle and work hard for things. Right now I think people outside this kingdom have a hard time believing in us because they don’t see how any of us truly understand what it’s like for them. And in time, I think I can be the fairy they will all trust and depend on because I’ll always be one of them.”

The hall kept very silent while they waited to hear the results. The Fairy Godmother turned away from her granddaughter and faced the room of spectators. “She has passed the test of *heart*,” she declared.

The fairies erupted into thunderous applause. The Fairy Godmother took her seat by the podiums and the Fairy Council was complete. A brand-new golden chair appeared out of thin air beside the Fairy Godmother. Alex went to the chair and stroked the armrest. She was finally an official member of the Fairy Council and the Happily Ever After Assembly and had her own seat to prove it.

The Fairy Godmother leaned in to her. “I told you there was nothing to worry about,” she said.

Alex smiled at her. “I can’t believe you’ve been testing me all week,” she said to her fellow council members.

“We knew you wouldn’t disappoint us,” Xanthous said.

“Congratulations, Alex,” Emerelda told her.

“Well done,” Rosette added.

“Aren’t you going to try your seat?” Coral asked.

Alex sat in her chair for the first time. She couldn’t deny that sitting alongside the rest of the council members with purpose was a very good feeling.

The celebration went on and Alex was continuously congratulated by fairies she had never met. At one point she noticed someone lingering behind a pillar nearby. She could have sworn she knew him. He was taller than her and wore an old suit a tad too big for him. A feathered mask covered his face.

He had been watching her the entire night but never came over to congratulate her or say hello. The more Alex looked at him, the more anxious he seemed to become. Finally the attention she was giving him obviously worried him too much and he headed out of the Fairy Palace. Alex’s curiosity got the best of her and she decided to follow him.

“Grandma, may I be excused from the party for a few minutes?” Alex asked.

“Of course, dear!”

Alex hurried out of the main hall and down the front steps of the Fairy Palace. She felt something crunch under her foot and realized the fellow in question had taken off his mask and dropped it on the stairs. She looked

ahead and saw him running into the gardens.

“Hey!” Alex called out, but he didn’t turn around.

She chased after him as fast as she could in her gown. Every time she got close enough to see who he was, he would turn and run down another path in the gardens. Alex felt like she was chasing him in a maze of colorful plants and flowers. Eventually she caught up to him on a small bridge that crossed over a pond.

“Freeze!” Alex demanded. “Show yourself or I’ll use my wand!”

He slowly turned around and his face was perfectly lit in the moonlight.

“Rook?!” Alex gasped.

“Hello, Alex,” Rook said timidly.

“What are you doing here?” Alex asked.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to run from you,” he said. “I just really wanted to see you again. I thought I would sneak into the ball and surprise you, but once I saw you and discovered it was *your* ball, I couldn’t help but stay.”

Alex didn’t know what to say. She had never meant to keep the reality of who she was a secret from him but she hadn’t wanted him to find out like this.

“Rook, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the whole story about who I am,” Alex said. “I was afraid I would scare you away if I did.”

Rook stared at her for a moment and then nodded. “So you’re the next Fairy Godmother, huh?”

“Yes,” Alex said sheepishly.

“And *you’re* the one who defeated the Enchantress?” he asked.

“Guilty of that as well,” she said.

Rook took a minute to wrap his head around it. He stared off at the gardens around them in absolute bewilderment. “This is bad,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t know what I’m going to do about this.”

Alex felt her heart drop into the pit of her stomach. “Rook, I’m still me,” she pleaded. “I’m still the same fairy you met at your farm and who you went on a walk with yesterday.”

To Alex’s relief, Rook looked up at her and smiled. “That’s not what I meant,” he said, and stepped closer to her. “I thought you were amazing the first time I met you, and the more I think about you, the more amazing you seem. Now that I know just how incredible you really are, I’m not sure how I’m ever going to let you go.”

“Oh,” Alex said. Her heart began racing and her butterflies fluttered to life. “Well, that’s very… very… *nice*.”

“You make me really happy, Alex, in ways I can’t explain,” he said.

“You make me really happy, too, Rook,” she said. “One of the reasons I’m wearing butterflies tonight is to match the butterflies you give me when I think of you.”

Rook stepped even closer to her and placed a hand on the side of her face. He looked into her eyes for a moment and then slowly leaned his head closer to hers. Alex’s heart was about to beat out of her chest. The butterflies fluttered more rapidly the closer he got to her. They flew off her dress just as Rook kissed her for the first time.

The celebration continued in the main hall despite Alex’s absence. The Fairy Godmother sat in her chair and happily watched over the party around her. It had been a terrific night and she couldn’t have been prouder of her granddaughter. However, the celebration had taken a toll on the Fairy Godmother and she was feeling very tired and a tad weak.

“It’s a wonderful party,” Mother Goose said, pulling up her own seat next to the Fairy Godmother. “Nothing will ever beat that mixer I threw during the Crusades but this might be a close second.”

“Yes, I think everyone is enjoying themselves,” the Fairy Godmother said softly.

“Are you feeling all right, FG?” Mother Goose asked. “You don’t seem very festive.”

“I’m just glad this day is finally here,” she said. “The Fairy Kingdom can now rest assured that their future is in good hands.”

Mother Goose took a good look at her. She knew something was wrong even if it wasn’t plainly written on her face. “I’ve known you for centuries; I can tell when something is bothering you,” she said.

The Fairy Godmother sighed. “Can I confide in you?” she asked her oldest friend.

“Of course,” Mother Goose said. “If I gave you a gold coin for every secret of mine you’ve kept, I’d be broke.”

The Fairy Godmother looked directly into her eyes. “Years ago when I declared Ezmia as my heir, there was always something in the back of my mind that told me it wasn’t meant to be,” she said. “I ignored it, but then later that feeling proved to be intuition. Now that I’ve declared Alex as my heir, there is another feeling that’s come over me that I can’t ignore.”

“What is it?” Mother Goose asked. “Do you have doubts about Alex, too?”

“On the contrary,” the Fairy Godmother replied. “After months of training her and finally seeing her among the council tonight, I feel nothing but hopeful… and *tired*.”

“How tired?” Mother Goose asked.

“More tired than I’ve felt before in my life,” the Fairy Godmother told her.

Mother Goose’s face fell. “Are you telling me what I think you might be?”

The Fairy Godmother nodded. “Yes,” she said with a bittersweet smile. “You and I are the only ones old enough to know how magic works in these situations. We know what’s to be expected. But please remember this is good news. It means we’ve finally found the true heir of magic and she’s ready.”

Mother Goose didn’t say a word. She took the Fairy Godmother’s hand into her own and smiled as widely as she could, given the news.

“I think I’m going to retire for the night,” the Fairy Godmother said. “If you see Alex, please tell her I’ll see her in the morning.”

The Fairy Godmother slowly disappeared into soft glittery clouds, too tired to climb the stairs.

Suddenly the hall of fairies parted. Something was causing a ruckus, and they hurried away from it as fast as possible. Three boisterous witches had just arrived in the Fairy Palace, and they noisily made their way into the center of the hall.

Each wore a long, ragged black cloak, and they all smelled foul. One witch had cat eyes and twigs for hair, another was missing an eye but had two large noses, and the third had skin so loose, it appeared to be melting off her face like wax. They cackled loudly at the fairies cowering away from them.

The eight members of the Fairy Council formed a circle around the

witches. It was obvious they had come to start trouble.

“What business do you have here?” Emerelda asked them.

“We came here for the Fairy Inaugural Ball, of course,” the one-eyed witch said in a shrill voice.

“You weren’t invited,” Violetta said. “This celebration is for fairies only.”

“You’re breaking the laws of the Happily Ever After Assembly by being in our palace,” Xanthous threatened. “Witches are not allowed to set foot in this kingdom, and you know it.”

“Enforce those laws while you still have them, because soon there will be no assembly to threaten us with,” the one-eyed witch warned.

The fairies whispered to one another. What did the witch mean by this? Xanthous grew impatient and didn’t care to find out. “Leave at once, or we’ll have you thrown in Pinocchio Prison,” he threatened.

The witches cackled even harder at his attempt to frighten them. “But if we leave, you’ll never receive our gift,” the witch with cat eyes hissed. “We didn’t come all this way empty-handed.”

“We don’t want your gift,” Tangerina said. The bees flying around her neck and wrists flew at a quicker pace. “Go back to wherever it is you came from.”

“Trust us—you want what we have to offer,” the witch with waxy skin wheezed. “It’s less a gift and more a *prophecy*. It’s something the witches have kept to themselves for a great while, but since it’s such a ceremonious night, we thought we’d share it with you.”

“We don’t want to hear your ridiculous prophecy, either,” Rosette said.

“I do!” Coral peeped, speaking on behalf of all the curious fairies in the room. “It couldn’t hurt just to listen to whatever information they want to give us.”

The members of the Fairy Council looked at one another, but no one objected. “Very well,” Emerelda said. “If the witches promise to leave us in peace when they’ve finished, they may share their message with us.”

The witches scowled at the audience of fairies. They held hands and formed a circle. The witches cocked their heads up to the sky, and their mouths and eyes began to glow. A strong breeze swiftly blew through the palace as the witches chanted a rhyme in unison.

“Fairies, listen well,
For there is truth in the sights we foretell.
‘Happily ever after’ will not last,
When it’s greeted by a threat from the past.
One by one, the kingdoms will fall apart,
From battles they’ll lose and wars they’ll start.
Fairy blood will be spilt by the gallons,
When you face the army of thousands.”

The witches howled with laughter at the conclusion of their prophecy. All the fairies had to cover their ears from the screeching sounds.

“Get out of this palace before I turn you into ashes,” Xanthous said, and his whole body burst into flames.

“Yeah, and then I’ll kick your ashes into next week!” Mother Goose added.

The witches left the palace, cackling as loudly as they could the entire way. The fairies looked at one another anxiously. Did they have any reason to believe a word of what the witches had just said? Was an army of thousands really on its way? And from where?

“Do not worry,” Emerelda told them. “This was nothing more than a foolish attempt to ruin our evening, and I refuse to let them succeed. I say we continue our festivities in the gardens where we can celebrate under the stars.”

The fairies cheered, and Emerelda led all the guests through the hall and outside the palace.

“Aren’t you coming, Mother Goose?” Coral asked as she left with the others.

Mother Goose was the only one who had stayed behind. “Sure,” she said. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

“All right,” Coral said, and flew off with the others.

Mother Goose’s eyes darted left and right, and small beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. She was the only person to whom the witches’ prophecy meant something. Everything the witches had foretold was connected to a dark secret Mother Goose had kept for a very long time, a secret she had never told anyone, not even the Fairy Godmother.

But years ago Mother Goose had done everything in her power to make sure the army wouldn't cross over. Was the threat still alive?

There was only one way to find out, and there was only one person who could help her—and he was worlds away.

Mother Goose took a giant swig from her flask and hopped onto Lester's back. She steered him to the window of Alex's room. Mother Goose climbed in through the window and had a look around. She found the magic mirror placed in the corner and touched its glass. There was no response and Mother Goose looked desperately around the room. On Alex's nightstand she found the piece of mirror that had been chipped off, and to her relief it was shimmering—*he* was trying to contact Alex at that exact moment.

Mother Goose picked up the piece of mirror and the round, freckled face of the person she was trying to contact appeared.

"Oh, C-Dog, thank God it's you," Mother Goose said to Conner. "Listen, we need to talk. I need your help.…"

Chapter Nine

ABANDON TRIP

Conner spent his last two days in Germany locked in his hotel room pretending to be sick. While his principal and schoolmates went to museums and historical landmarks, he worked around the clock trying to contact his sister. He lived off sandwiches and sodas from a vending machine down the hall and twenty-minute naps when he needed them.

He had never been so angry with his sister before in his life. He knew Alex was busy preparing for the Fairy Inaugural Ball but it couldn't have been going on for all of the past three days. When he finally got ahold of her—if he ever got ahold of her—she'd better have a good reason for why she had been ignoring him.

Unfortunately, the day of their departure finally came and Conner had no choice but to travel home with the others. He regretted leaving—somehow being close to the grave sites of the Brothers Grimm made him feel closer to the issue.

Their group loaded into the van and said good-bye to Berlin as they drove to the airport. Once they arrived at the airport Conner wouldn't let the woman behind the counter check Betsy. His piece of magic mirror was inside and he didn't want to be away from it in case Alex tried contacting him. His unexpected clinginess to the suitcase didn't go unnoticed. Everyone in his group raised an eyebrow, but no one's eyebrow rose higher than Bree's. She was carefully watching every move he made.

They landed in London's Heathrow Airport and found seats by the gate for their connecting flight home.

"Oy, governor! Oy, governor!" Cindy said in a horrible cockney accent to all the British people that passed them by. "That's how you say hello here," she whispered to the others like she was filling them in on a secret.

"No, it's not," Bree said, embarrassed for her.

The Book Huggers had been giving Conner dirty looks ever since they left Berlin but Conner was unaware of it. He had been staring off into space

the entire time, clutching Betsy to his chest as if he were expecting someone to rip the suitcase out of his hands.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Bailey?” Mrs. Peters asked him as she read a newspaper.

“Better,” Conner said, without looking up.

“I’m so sorry you missed out on all the other activities; you would have enjoyed them,” his principal said.

“Next time” was all Conner could reply.

The gate’s intercom buzzed as an announcement was made. “Attention, all travelers leaving on international flight 527, we will be boarding the plane in ten minutes, starting with our first-class passengers.”

“Oh wonderful,” Mrs. Peters said, and folded up her newspaper. “We’ll be in the air on our way home in no time.”

Conner knew it would be difficult to use the piece of magic mirror once he was on the plane. He decided to try reaching Alex one more time before boarding.

“I’m going to use the restroom before we get on the plane,” Conner announced to the girls. He hurried across the waiting area to the nearest bathroom with Betsy in his arms.

The Book Huggers rolled their eyes at Conner just like every time he had said or done anything on the trip. Bree watched Conner as he went, curious about why he needed his suitcase to use the restroom.

Conner entered the men’s room and looked under all the stalls to make sure he was alone. He locked himself inside one, put the toilet lid down, and had a seat. He opened Betsy on the floor in front of him and retrieved the piece of mirror. He pressed the glass with his finger and watched it shimmer for a few moments but had no luck reaching Alex. He was so frustrated and disappointed.

However doubtful he was about getting a different result, Conner decided to tap the glass one more time before calling it quits. The glass shimmered for as long as it always did and right when Conner was about to put the piece of mirror away, his heart dropped. A face appeared in the mirror—but it wasn’t the person he was expecting.

“Oh, C-Dog, thank God it’s you,” Mother Goose said. “Listen, we need to talk. I need your help.…”

Conner was so excited to finally be in contact with someone he almost

fell off the toilet. *“Mother Goose! It’s so good to see your face!”* He was in hysterics.

“If I had a gold coin for every time someone said that, I would be in debt,” she cracked. “Listen, I have to talk to you about something very important.”

She seemed just as flustered and worried as he was, but Conner figured her concern could wait, compared to the news he had to share.

“No! I have something I need to tell you that’s *more* important,” he said. *“Something major has happened and I need to tell someone in the fairy-tale world about it!”*

Mother Goose eyed him strangely. “Kid, are you in a bathroom?” she asked. “Because if so, I think you should maybe talk to a doctor about this and not me—”

“I’m in a bathroom because I’m trying to hide!” Conner said. “I’m in Europe on a class trip! This was the only place I could get privacy!”

“Europe?” Mother Goose asked. “Okay, kid, calm down and slowly tell me what’s going on before you have an accident.”

Conner took a deep breath and started from the beginning. “I was in Germany for this thing with my principal and a couple other kids. The University of Berlin found three brand-new fairy tales in a time capsule left by the Brothers Grimm. They included careful instructions not to publicize or publish the stories until two hundred years later. We and a bunch of other people went to the cemetery where the Brothers Grimm are buried, and there was a special reading of the stories. The first two weren’t important but I think the third one was a warning in disguise.”

“A warning?” Mother Goose asked. “A warning about what?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out,” he said. “The story was too similar to real life not to have a bigger purpose.”

“Tell me what the story was about,” she prompted.

“It was about a pair of brothers who told stories just like the Brothers Grimm. They got their stories from a fairy who lived in a secret castle, *just like the Brothers Grimm got their stories from you, and from Grandma and the other fairies*. One day a greedy king forced the brothers to provide him with a map to the secret castle so he could conquer it. A magical bird that also lived in the secret castle, *who I’m assuming is supposed to be you*, gave the brothers an enchanted map to give to the king, so that it would take him

two hundred years to get to the castle, leaving the people and magical creatures lots of time to prepare a defense. The brothers in the story were afraid the magical bird would forget to warn the others in the secret castle about the approaching king so they wrote a story about it, hoping the story would reach the secret castle before the king's army of thousands did."

"Wait, can you say that last part again?" Mother Goose interrupted.

"I said, they hoped their story would reach the secret castle before the king's army of thousands did, in case the magical bird had forgotten to warn the others," Conner repeated.

All the blood drained from Mother Goose's face and her eyes drifted off into a fearful trance. "But it's impossible," she said softly to herself.

"What's impossible?" Conner asked. "Does this story mean something to you? Because it sounds like something bad started two hundred years ago and the Brothers Grimm are warning everyone about it now."

Mother Goose didn't respond. All she could do was shake her head from side to side as she thought about what he told her.

"Mother Goose, if this story is real, then I'm afraid something horrible is about to happen in the Land of Stories and we need to stop it," he said.

She finally looked up and made eye contact with him again. "I'm afraid their story is based on something that is very real," she told him in a stricken tone.

Conner felt his heart descend deeper into his stomach. "What happened?" he asked.

Mother Goose sighed and then told Conner a secret she had managed to keep to herself for years—until this moment.

"Two hundred years ago in Otherworld time, there was a man named Jacques Marquis, a general in the French Empire's Grande Armée," she said. "General Marquis was a smart man; he knew the Brothers Grimm stories about mythical creatures and kingdoms were more than just fiction. He had them followed and discovered the truth about where their stories came from. He wanted to conquer the magnificent lands he read about, in the name of the French empire. So, he kidnapped the Brothers Grimm and demanded they provide his army with a portal into the fairy-tale world or he would kill their family."

"And did they give him one?" Conner asked.

"That's where I come into the story," Mother Goose said. "I never gave

them a map like the bird in the story, but I told the Brothers Grimm of a portal they could lead General Marquis and his army of five thousand men to. But I bewitched the portal before the army arrived so that it would take them two hundred Otherworld years to cross through it and into the fairy-tale world."

"And that was two hundred years ago!" Conner exclaimed. "So why haven't they crossed into the fairy-tale world yet?"

"Because, after the Enchantress was defeated, your grandmother closed the portal between worlds, and just in the nick of time," Mother Goose said. "Thank God she did, because it meant I never had to tell her about the approaching army. I loved the Otherworld so much but I couldn't object to closing the portal since I knew that it would prevent that awful man and his soldiers from entering our world."

"Didn't anyone wonder where a group of five thousand soldiers disappeared to?" Conner asked.

"No, because shortly after, in the winter of 1812, Napoleon and the Grande Armée also invaded Russia," Mother Goose explained. "The French soldiers couldn't stand the cold and the retreating Russian soldiers hadn't left them any crops or livestock to survive on. The death toll was catastrophic and everyone assumed General Marquis and his men were among those that perished."

Conner sighed a deep breath of relief. "That's wonderful news," he said. "That means the army is still stuck in the portal and will never reach the Land of Stories, right?"

He expected Mother Goose to confirm his relief but instead her eyes drifted off again into another concerned gaze.

"The portal is closed permanently, isn't it?" Conner asked.

"It *was*," Mother Goose said. "But there is a chance the portal between the worlds may be… *re-opened*."

"How?" Conner asked.

Mother Goose knew the answer but decided it wasn't her place to tell him yet. "I can't tell you why or even that it will for certain, all I can tell you is that there is a chance," she repeated. "And the only way we'll know for sure is if we check whether or not the portal is working. If it can be opened from the Otherworld side, that means it can be opened on the Land of Stories side as well, and the Grande Armée may cross into the fairy-tale

world after all this time."

"Then tell me where it is! I'll check it myself," he pleaded.

"Absolutely not," Mother Goose said firmly. "I still haven't forgiven myself for telling Alex about the Enchantress—I couldn't live with myself if I sent you off on a dangerous chase as well."

Conner was so frustrated he wanted to throw the piece of mirror across the bathroom. He was still being treated like a child after all this time. But Mother Goose raised a hand to silence him before he could argue.

"But I may know someone *else* who can tell you," she said with a mischievously raised eyebrow.

"Who?" Conner said. "Someone in this world?"

"Yes," she said. "Where exactly in Europe are you?"

"I'm at an airport in London," he said.

This made Mother Goose extremely happy and she made an excited fist with her free hand. "Terrific, I have a friend in London—"

"It's not the queen, I hope," Conner said. "She'd be difficult to get to."

"No, the queen and I haven't spoken in years." Mother Goose waved off the idea. "This friend is very old but has been a confidant of mine for a very long time."

"Who is he?"

"He's more of a *what* than a *who*," Mother Goose explained. "Find the lion from the Red Lion Brewery. Tell him I sent you, and he'll tell you everything you need to know."

"The lion from the Red Lion Brewery?" Conner repeated to make sure he had heard her correctly. "Is he a real lion?"

"He's a statue," Mother Goose said. "He was the mascot of the brewery I spent most of the 1800s at—I met a lot of my closest drinking buddies there. Now I really need to go before your sister catches me in her room. We shouldn't tell anyone else about this unless we know for certain the portal has been re-opened. I don't want to dampen anyone's spirits around here if there's nothing to worry about."

"And what if it's open?" Conner said.

Mother Goose gulped. "Then we're in big trouble," she said. "Good luck, kid—oh and one more thing, do you still have that poker chip I gave you?"

"Yes, I take it everywhere with me," Conner said.

“Good—you’ll need it,” Mother Goose said, and then she faded from the piece of mirror in his hand.

Conner’s head was spinning but he knew there was no time to waste. He quickly created a plan based on the tasks Mother Goose had given him. First, he had to sneak out of the airport and find a way into the city. Then he had to find the Red Lion Brewery and the lion and ask it where the portal was and how to check whether it was still closed. If the portal could be opened from the Otherworld side, then that meant it was open to the fairy-tale world, and the Grande Armée could be moments away from crossing over. His plan seemed straightforward. He packed the piece of mirror into Betsy and left the stall not wanting to waste another moment. However, his momentum came to a screeching halt as soon as he realized he wasn’t alone in the bathroom.

“Bree?” Conner said in horror. Bree was standing just outside the stall and, judging from the bewildered expression on her face, she had heard every word of his and Mother Goose’s conversation. “What are you doing in the men’s bathroom?”

“They started boarding early,” Bree said. “Mrs. Peters wanted me to check on you. When I got close to the bathroom I heard voices. I know you don’t have a cell phone so I came in to see who you were talking to—and now after saying that out loud I realize how many privacy laws I just broke.”

“How much of my conversation did you hear?” Conner asked.

“Enough,” Bree said blankly.

Conner had no idea what to say to her. “Well, thank you for coming to check on me but I’m not going home,” he said.

“I gathered,” Bree said.

“Please don’t tell Mrs. Peters where I’m going,” Conner pleaded with her. “There is someone in London I really need to meet. It’s really important.”

Bree’s face finally returned to normal. She quietly bobbed her head as she contemplated the situation. “I won’t tell anyone,” she said. “Because I’m going with you.”

Conner shook his head in disbelief. “What? You can’t go with me—you don’t even know what’s going on.”

Bree crossed her arms. “I’ve known something was going on since the

plane ride to Germany. Your sister disappeared last year with almost no explanation, you knew the plots of fairy tales that hadn't seen the light of day in two hundred years, and I just caught you somehow communicating with a woman called Mother Goose about an army invading another dimension."

Conner closed his eyes—there was no coming back from it now.

"With all that in mind, my best guess is that you are somehow connected to the *fairy-tale world*, and now you have to make sure an army from the 1800s isn't going to cross into that world and put your sister and grandmother in jeopardy. *Did I miss anything?*"

Bree said the whole thing in one breath without blinking. Conner was stunned. Reading all those mystery novels had paid off.

"Okay, I guess the dots aren't that hard to connect," Conner said. "But there's no way you're going with me. Do you know how much trouble you'd get into?"

Bree tipped her head back and grunted toward the ceiling. "I can live with trouble. I'll tell you what I can't live with—hearing one more conversation between the Book Huggers about a boy band or a fictitious relationship from a novel. I have three younger sisters—I went to Germany to escape all *that* and to have a European adventure. So far it seems you're the only person who can supply that and you could probably use help so I'm going with you, like it or not."

Conner's mouth and eyes were wide open. It was the most excited he had ever seen Bree get.

"How are you taking all of this so well?" he asked. "Don't you think the idea of another dimension seems insane?"

"Not at all," Bree said. "I'm a writer, too, Conner, and the reason I write is because I've always believed there is more to life than most people are willing to believe. You're just the first person to prove it to me."

Conner recognized the excitement in her eyes; he had seen it every day in his sister's eyes after their first trip into the Land of Stories. Now that Bree knew the truth, how could Conner tell her she couldn't go with him?

"All right, you can come," Conner told her. "As long as you promise never to share with another soul anything you've found out or anything you might see."

Bree slowly nodded, smiling the biggest smile ever. "I promise," she

said, and Conner knew he could trust her.

“Good, now let’s sneak out of the airport,” he said.

They peered out of the men’s restroom and glanced at the gate where their principal and schoolmates stood. The five of them were impatiently waiting for Conner and Bree to return before joining the line to board the plane. Mrs. Peters scanned the lounge, trying to see where they had gone. Then she looked down at her watch and Conner and Bree took it as a cue. They held on to their luggage as tightly as they could and bolted out of the bathroom, running down the terminal before she looked up. They followed the exit signs and went into customs.

“We got this—just follow my lead,” Bree said. They got in line, keeping their heads down in case Mrs. Peters came looking for them. When it was Bree’s turn, she walked up to the customs officer in the booth and presented her passport.

“Are you here for business or pleasure?” the officer asked her.

“Pleasure,” Bree said casually. “I’ve come to visit my aunt and see a few shows in the West End.”

She was good at this deception thing. The customs officer stamped her passport and sent Bree on her way. Conner went next, confident he had nothing to worry about.

“Are you here for business or pleasure?” the officer asked him.

“Pleasure,” Conner replied. “I’ve come for the food.”

The customs officer flinched and looked up at him awkwardly. “The *food*?” he asked.

Bree slapped her hand against her forehead. Conner wanted to put his whole leg in his mouth. Of all the things to say, he’d picked possibly the only thing Great Britain *wasn’t* known for. Conner panicked, thinking fast.

“You’ve never heard of the Food?” he went on. “They’re only the greatest singing quartet of chefs-turned-tenors on the planet! They have a concert at the Buckinghamshirevilleton Coliseum. Here, let me give you one of their albums.”

Conner reached for his suitcase but the customs officer held up a hand to stop him. “Please don’t,” he said. He stamped Conner’s passport and then sent him on his way, too. Conner had never been so thankful to be perceived as just a stupid kid.

Bree was appalled by Conner’s stunt. “*Buckinghamshirevilleton?*” she

whispered. *“Are you out of your mind? How are you supposed to save another dimension when you can’t even get out of an airport?”*

“Give me a break—obviously I’m under a lot of pressure!” Conner whispered back.

They made it outside the airport and looked around at the sea of cars, taxis, and buses around the pickup zone.

“How are we going to get to central London?” Bree asked. “Are we old enough to take a taxi by ourselves?”

Conner looked down the curb and saw something that gave him an idea. A large group of obnoxious American teenagers was boarding a bus. They were looked after by only one chaperone that Conner could see and she was practically pulling her hair out trying to manage. “Everyone settle down and get on the bus!” the chaperone screamed. “I have your parents’ phone numbers and I will use them!”

Conner gestured for Bree to follow him. “Keep your head down, I’ve got an idea,” he said. They both looked at the ground and joined the line of students boarding the bus. The line was moving so quickly the chaperone couldn’t keep up with checking the names on her clipboard and finally just gave up. Conner and Bree boarded the bus effortlessly and took a seat in the very back.

“All right, that was a good one,” Bree said. “It almost makes up for Buckinghamshirevilleton.”

“Thanks,” Conner said. “This should get us into the city without a hitch.”

The other teenagers aboard the bus were so busy taunting each other and taking pictures of themselves they didn’t even notice the strangers in the back. The bus pulled away from the airport and headed into town.

“All right, I want to hear the whole story, and don’t skip any details,” Bree said to Conner.

“About what?” he asked.

“Everything I need to know before venturing out on this adventure with you,” she said. “About you, your sister, that goose lady, and this dimension we’re about to save.”

Conner didn’t know where to begin. “Okay, but it’s a long story,” he warned.

“Great,” Bree said. “Long stories are my favorite.”

Conner figured there was no use in keeping anything from her now. He told Bree his and Alex's whole story, starting with when they were magically transported into the Land of Stories for the first time and ending with their last good-bye when the portal between the two worlds was closed.

Bree hung on every word he said. It felt so therapeutic for Conner to talk to someone about it besides his family. He was very glad Bree had insisted on coming on this new escapade of his, and as Conner knew all too well, adventures were always best when there was someone to share them with.

Chapter Ten

THE SOUTH BANK LION

The bus finally arrived in central London and they all went quiet as they took in the first sights of the regal city. London was a multi-cultural maze of pristine buildings and proud tradition. It was difficult to differentiate the landmarks from the non-landmarks as everything was so well kept. Every building looked a hundred years old and brand-new at the same time.

The teenagers aboard the bus pointed to the landmarks they recognized as they drove past them—Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, Big Ben, the Tower of London, and Tower Bridge.

“This is the most proper place I’ve ever been in my life.” Conner nudged Bree. “Just being here makes me feel like I should be dressed up.”

The bus stopped in a place called Trafalgar Square, near the passengers’ hotel. The square was filled with tourists taking photos of the impressive statues and fountains in front of the National Gallery, which stretched across the back of the square like a grand backdrop. The teenagers raced off the bus to be amid the tourists outside and Conner and Bree exited with them.

Once they were on the street, the first thing Conner did was find an ATM.

“Forgive me, Bob,” Conner said as he looked down at the credit card Bob had so kindly given him. He stuck it into the machine and took out the maximum amount of pounds in the maximum amount of transactions it would allow at a time.

“That’s a lot of money—in any country,” Bree said. She covered him from any onlookers as he stuck the money in the pockets of his jacket and pants and then put the rest of it in his suitcase. “But it’s smart of you to take out a bunch of cash so no one can use your transactions to trace you. They do that to find suspects in the crime books I read.”

“Oh, I never thought about that,” he said with a shrug. “I just took out as much as I could because it was my first time using an ATM.”

The first thing Conner bought was a map from a street merchant. He opened it up and scanned the tiny print depicting the streets and attractions around them.

“There’s one!” he said happily, pointing at something on the map.

“What were you looking for?” Bree asked him.

“A library,” Conner said. “We’ll go to the library and look up where to find the Red Lion Brewery.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to look it up on the Internet with my phone?” Bree asked.

Since Conner had never had a smart phone before, he hadn’t considered this possibility. “No, I don’t trust those things,” he said. “I’d rather do it the traditional way—we’re in London after all.”

“Suit yourself,” Bree said.

They followed the map a few blocks west, to the closest library, which was tucked away in the corner of St. James’s Square. Conner and Bree walked up the front steps and pulled open its wooden doors. Conner had always found libraries intimidating and that feeling was heightened by being inside one in another country.

“Are you members?” a librarian at the front desk asked them. She glared at them over her thick-framed glasses. Conner always thought librarians could read minds and was afraid this one was going to prove his theory correct.

“No, but we’re interested in joining,” Bree said calmly. “May we have a look around?”

The librarian granted her request with a gesture for them to continue inside.

“Baggage is not allowed inside the library,” the librarian said when she saw their suitcases.

“Oh, of course,” Bree said. “May we leave them to the side here?”

She put her bag down near the front door and Conner placed Betsy beside it. The librarian permitted it with a nod and they continued inside. Conner and Bree found a table in the back of the first floor.

“I’ll be right back; I’m going to find some books,” Conner said, and disappeared into the rows of shelves. Bree sat down and made herself comfortable, looking at her phone while she waited. Conner returned twenty minutes later with a stack of heavy books.

“Look what I found,” Conner said. He showed Bree the first book in his stack.

“Breweries of Britain,” Bree read. “That’s great, Conner, but I looked up the Red Lion Brewery on my phone and apparently it was demolished in 1949.”

“You can’t trust anything the Internet says,” Conner said. He frantically flipped through the book until he found a page written about the Red Lion Brewery. “Oh no, according to this, the Red Lion Brewery was demolished in 1949.”

“Shocking,” Bree said sarcastically. “I don’t mean to be a downer but I don’t think the lion we’re looking for is around anymore.”

Conner let out a defeated sigh but he wasn’t ready to give up just yet. He pulled out another book from his stack, titled *The Statues of London*, and began flipping through it. After a couple minutes Conner started fidgeting with excitement as he read.

“Check this out,” Conner said, showing Bree the section he had just read.

> The South Bank Lion
>
> 13 tons, 13 feet wide
>
> As silly as it would be to say a statue has lived, of all the statues in London the one known as the South Bank Lion has lived many different lives. The statue was created in 1837 by W. F. Woodington, and was constructed of artificial Coade stone. The lion lived his first life as a symbol, guarding the Red Lion Brewery facing the River Thames in Lambeth, London. An intriguing aura of mystery surrounds the lion as it was one of the only sculptures in the area not severely damaged in the bombings of World War II, and when the Red Lion Brewery was eventually demolished in 1949, the lion was recovered from the demolition completely unscathed. King George VI took a liking to the lion and had him moved to Waterloo station. He spent his second life on display at the station for several years before being moved to his current resting place on Westminster Bridge in the South Bank area of central London. The remains of a secondary lion statue were also found in the demolition of the Red Lion Brewery. It was pieced back together and painted gold, and can now be seen at Twickenham Stadium.

Conner and Bree were both bubbling with excitement.

“That must be it! That’s the lion we need to find!” Bree said.

Conner looked over the map at all the bridges crossing over the River Thames. “I found Westminster Bridge!” he said. “It’s right by Big Ben and it’s walking distance from here.”

“Great,” Bree said. “Let’s go see the lion!”

The duo finished in the library just before wearing out their welcome. They collected their luggage and walked briskly through St. James’s Square and followed the map to Westminster Bridge. They passed countless statues and sculptures of lions as they went, each looking more regal and ferocious than the last one. Conner grew anxious thinking about meeting the thirteen-ton, thirteen-foot-long South Bank Lion. He hoped the lion wouldn’t be too frightening to approach—enchanted objects were always unpredictable.

Westminster Bridge began at the Houses of Parliament, at the base of Big Ben, and stretched across the River Thames to just below the giant Ferris wheel known as the London Eye. The bridge was busy with hundreds of tourists and citizens alike. Multitudes of cars and red double-decker buses continuously drove across the bridge as well.

Conner and Bree reached the end of the bridge and looked across the street. In the midst of the pedestrian chaos just below the towering London Eye, they found the South Bank Lion. He was massive and pale gray and stood on top of a tall pedestal. Something about him was different from all the other lions they’d seen in the city, and Conner and Bree picked up on it as soon as they laid eyes on him. Rather than a vicious and threatening scowl on his face, the South Bank Lion had a genuinely *concerned* expression. His eyes were wide and his mouth was open.

“That’s got to be him,” Conner said.

“What makes you so sure?” Bree said.

“Because I make that face whenever Mother Goose tells me a secret, too,” Conner said.

Bree looked around at the crowds. “Are we supposed to walk over there and talk to him in front of all these people?” she asked.

“No, we’ll have to come back later when they’re all gone,” he said. “We might have to wait until after midnight.”

They left the bridge and got a bite to eat at a local pub. Bree insisted they have an authentic English experience and forced Conner to order fish and chips with her. After they were done eating they camped out in St.

James's Park and waited until after nightfall before returning to the bridge.

They lingered across the street from the South Bank Lion until the traffic of cars and people was almost nonexistent. Then they crossed the street and stood directly below the lion.

"Say something to him," Bree said. She nudged Conner.

"What am I supposed to say?" he asked.

"I don't know, aren't you used to these kinds of things?"

"Enchanted statues in the middle of crowded cities? No, I can't say I'm an expert," he said.

"I have faith in you." Bree smiled at him.

Her smile made his rosy cheeks a bit rosier. He figured he had nothing to lose, so Conner took a deep breath and addressed the lion like he would anyone else.

"Hello up there!" he called. "I don't mean to disturb you, but my friend and I were wondering if we could speak to you."

The lion didn't say a word or move an inch. There was nothing to indicate Conner was anything but a crazy person talking to a statue.

"You must be exhausted," Conner called. "You've been on your feet for, like, what, a century and a half?"

Buttering up the statue didn't help. Knowing what an idiot he must look like talking to this statue didn't help matters, either.

"So, you like London?" Conner asked. "We just got here today and *whoa*—what a neat place!"

Bree grew impatient with both of them and stepped closer to address the lion herself. "Listen, pussy cat," she hissed. "We've got questions for you! We know you can talk, we know you're friends with Mother Goose, and we're not leaving here until you give us the answers we need!"

"What are you doing?" Conner whispered. *"You think he's going to talk to us if you treat him like that?"*

"We're playing good cop, bad cop," she whispered back. *"Trust me; it works every time in my crime novels."*

Conner rubbed his fingers through his hair, convinced this strategy was a dead-end. But when he looked back at the lion, he could have sworn the lion's face had changed; he looked *more* concerned.

"Bree, do you notice anything different about the lion?" he whispered.

She looked closer and her eyes lit up. "Yes."

“Say something else about Mother Goose,” Conner instructed. *“I think he’s afraid of her.”*

Bree nodded and spoke to the lion again. “Hey! Mother Goose told us that you would talk to us, but if you’d rather talk to her yourself, she can be here in five minutes.”

There was no doubt about it: The lion was moving! They watched the South Bank Lion’s face grow more fretful the more they mentioned Mother Goose. Eventually the statue couldn’t take it anymore and shifted from its solid position.

“No, please don’t call Mother Goose!” the lion begged, coming to life before their eyes. It startled Bree and she jumped behind Conner. It was her first magical sighting. Conner was used to seeing magic at its finest, but it never got old. He stared up at the lion with an amazed smile.

“So you *can* talk,” he said.

“Yes, I can talk,” the lion admitted. “I’ll answer whatever questions you have, just please don’t call that woman here.”

Conner found his dislike of Mother Goose wildly amusing. “Why are you so afraid of Mother Goose?”

“I’m not afraid of *her*; it’s her stories I can’t stand.” The lion shook his head. “Over the years she’s told me some outlandish secrets that I never wanted to know—and she never spares any of the details! If you knew half the things I know, you would look differently at her, too. It’s too much for one lion to bear!”

“Is that why you look so concerned all the time?” Conner asked.

“That’s part of it,” the lion said, and his face suddenly grew very sad. He whimpered, like he was about to cry. “I’m also afraid of heights and these people keep putting me on top of very tall things! And they separated me from my brother when the Red Lion Brewery was demolished and I don’t know where he is!”

The stone lion sniffled into his large paws.

“Oh, you’re talking about the second lion statue,” Bree said. She had regained her confidence and stepped out from behind Conner. “He’s still around! They painted him gold and put him on display at some sports arena.”

The South Bank Lion was happy to hear this and looked a little less concerned than before. “That’s such a relief,” he said. “He always loved

sports.”

“Can he talk and move like you?” Conner asked.

“No, he’s just a normal statue, but we’re made of the same artificial stone,” the lion said. “I was the only lion Mother Goose enchanted.”

“Why did she enchant you?” Conner asked. They had several important questions to ask but he couldn’t resist hearing the story.

“In the mid-1800s Mother Goose used to visit her friends at the Red Lion Brewery every Sunday night,” the lion told him. “Around the same time she had just started training that horrible gander of hers to fly her around. He was a horrible flyer and every so often they would crash right into me on the roof. One night they were a little too careless and hit me so hard I was knocked off the roof and shattered into pieces on the ground. She magically put me back together and cast an invincibility spell on me so I wouldn’t leave such a mess the next time they knocked me off the roof.”

“Ah, so that’s why you stayed in such good condition during the war and the demolition,” Bree said.

“But that doesn’t explain why you can talk,” Conner pointed out.

“Well, after a few years Mother Goose’s brewery friends started dying off,” the lion explained. “She wanted a friend who would stick around and give her an excuse to come back to the brewery. And unfortunately she chose me. Although I still don’t understand why she gave me the ability to speak when all I ever did was listen.”

“Speaking of listening,” Conner said, “do you remember her mentioning anything about the Brothers Grimm and sabotaging a portal?”

The lion scrunched his forehead and tried to remember. “It rings a bell,” he said. “Was this the same time she led the French soldiers into a trap?”

“Yes! That’s it!” Conner said with a happy jump.

The lion’s eyes grew wider and he nodded his giant stone head. “Oh boy, do I remember *that* story,” he said. “I wish I could forget it! It gave me nightmares for fifty years!”

Conner knew he needed to be very clear and careful as he got the information out of him to avoid making any mistakes later.

“Do you remember where the portal was that she trapped the soldiers inside?” he asked.

“I do,” the lion said confidently. “It was deep in the Bavarian woods, between twin trees that grew between twin medieval castles. The only

reason I remember is because I'm a twin myself."

"Where is Bavaria?" Conner asked.

"It's an old country that's now a state of Germany," Bree said. "Two trees between two medieval castles seems pretty easy to find."

"Oh, you wouldn't find the trees and the castles anymore," the lion told them regretfully. "They're gone."

"What?" Conner and Bree said together. "What do you mean they're gone?"

"After the Brothers Grimm tricked the soldiers into entering the tampered-with portal, Mother Goose grew paranoid that the soldiers would find a way out, back into this world, so she asked her friend Ludwig for a very large favor," he said.

"What was the favor?" Conner asked.

"She asked Ludwig to build one of his elaborate castles on top of the portal, so if the soldiers were ever to re-emerge from it they might be tricked into thinking they had arrived in the fairy-tale world."

"He built a castle for her?" Conner asked in disbelief. "That *is* a big favor."

Bree gasped and clutched her hands together. "Wait a second, are you talking about *King Ludwig II* of Bavaria?" she asked.

"That was his official name, I believe," the lion said. "Mother Goose always just called him *Ludwig* or *Wiggy*."

Conner was the only one who had never heard of Ludwig. "Who was he?" he asked.

"Haven't you ever heard of *the mad fairy-tale king*?" Bree asked. Conner shook his head. "He was addicted to building lavish palaces for himself, all inspired by other palaces he had visited around the world."

"He sounds like someone Red Riding Hood would be friends with," Conner said, but he dropped the subject when he remembered he was the only person there who knew her.

"The last home Ludwig built for himself was Neuschwanstein Castle," Bree continued. "It was inspired by all his favorite childhood stories and looks like something you'd find in a storybook. It's considered one of the wonders of the modern world."

"Wait, *is* considered, meaning the castle is still around?" Conner asked.

"Oh yes," Bree said. "It's easily one of the biggest tourist attractions in

southern Germany. It's always been a mystery why Ludwig built the castle, but it makes sense now."

"But what happened to the portal? Is it somewhere inside the castle?" Conner asked.

"I'm assuming so, but I wouldn't know," the lion said. "I've lived within a five-kilometer radius my whole life."

"Do you know how we can check the portal to see if it's open or not?" Conner asked.

"Let me think, let me think," the lion said, and he closed his eyes while he remembered. "Yes! The Bavarian portal is accessed when a person of magic blood plays eight notes on a special ancient panpipe."

Conner made a mental note of this crucial information. "If it has to be played by someone of magic blood, then how did the Brothers Grimm open it for the French soldiers?" he asked.

The lion scrunched his nose; it was the part of the story he didn't like telling. "Mother Goose took a dagger and made a cut in her hand and one in Wilhelm Grimm's hand," he said. "They held their hands tightly together and let some of the magic from Mother Goose's blood flow into his. I really wish she had kept that part to herself—the thought of blood makes me incredibly squeamish since I don't have any myself."

"And where can we find this panpipe?" Conner asked.

"I believe it's with the rest of Mother Goose's Otherworld belongings in a vault in a Monégasque bank," the lion said. "And I only know that because she measured me one day to see if I would fit in the vault, too. Thank goodness I was too big."

"So, *where is the bank*?" Conner asked.

"Monégasque means it's in Monte Carlo," Bree said.

"Right," Conner said. "So where in Monte Carlo is this bank?"

The lion thought about it and seemed very disappointed when he couldn't come up with its location. "I don't remember," he said with a frown. "If only my mind were as concrete as the rest of me."

Thankfully, this was the only question the lion didn't have an answer to. Conner paced the sidewalk, concentrating carefully—the lion's words reminded him of something Mother Goose had said in the past. He felt he should know where the bank was.…

He opened his suitcase and dug around until he found his lucky poker

chip from Mother Goose. He looked closely at its design. The chip was dark blue and the symbols of the houses of cards circled around the edge: a heart, a spade, a diamond, a club. But in the very center of the chip, instead of a number to mark its value, there was an image of a small golden key.

“I think I know where to find the vault,” Conner said eagerly to Bree. “What time is it?”

Bree looked at the screen of her phone. “It’s almost four in the morning,” she said. “Wow, time flies when you’re talking to an enchanted statue.”

Conner looked up at the lion gratefully. “Thank you so much for all your help, but you’ll have to excuse us now,” he said. “We have to get to the train station as soon as possible.”

The lion seemed sad to see them go and his face returned to its trademark concerned expression. “Good luck,” the lion said. “And next time you see Mother Goose, please tell her I understand she’s a busy woman and there’s no need for her to visit me… *ever again*.”

Conner took off along Westminster Bridge, speed walking as fast as he could. Bree said good-bye to the South Bank Lion and caught up with him.

“So where are we off to next?” she asked him with bright eyes.

“We’re going to the *Lumière des Etoiles* casino,” Conner replied.

“Where is that?”

“Somewhere in Monte Carlo, I guess,” he said.

Chapter Eleven

THE LUMIÈRE DES ETOILES CASINO

Conner and Bree made it to the train station at St. Pancras a little before six o'clock that morning. They hadn't slept all night but neither showed any indication of being tired. They were living on adrenaline and determination. Conner had never run away before but now he understood why Jack and Goldilocks preferred a life on the run. Despite the circumstances, it had been a very exciting day.

Bree hadn't stopped smiling since they left the South Bank. *"I'm friends with a lion statue, I'm friends with a lion statue,"* she sang to herself over and over again.

They gawked at a large map over the ticketing counters and tried to make sense of all the colorful lines showing which trains traveled where.

"Doesn't look like there's anything direct to Monte Carlo," Conner said. "We'll have to stop in Paris where that thick blue line ends and then get on the thin dotted orange line."

"Your knowledge of travel terminology is so impressive," Bree joked.

They stood in line and zigzagged to the ticket counter with the other early-morning travelers. The ticketing agent had frizzy red hair and huge bags under her eyes. She drank coffee from an enormous mug like it was water.

"Next?" she said.

Conner and Bree approached her. "Two tickets to Paris, please," Bree said.

The agent looked at them like they had asked to borrow her car. "Do you have a guardian accompanying you? Or an unaccompanied-minor form signed by your parents?" she asked.

Bree and Conner froze. Both of them had somehow forgotten that being fourteen-year-olds might set them back on this trip.

"We… we…," Bree began but nothing else came out.

Conner panicked and looked around the train station for a solution. In a

far corner he saw a very elderly woman sitting in a wheelchair all by herself. Her hair was teased up into a large pouf and she had a full face of makeup on. She somberly stared at the floor as she held a purse and small suitcase on her lap.

"We're traveling with our *grandmother*," Conner said.

"We are?" Bree asked. Conner gestured to the old woman in the corner. "I mean, *we are*," Bree continued. "Stupid me, make it three tickets to Paris," she said back at the ticketing agent.

"That's your grandmother?" the agent asked.

"Yes, that's *Granny Pearl*," Conner said. "She doesn't speak a lick of English so she's asked us to buy the tickets." Conner energetically waved at the old woman. "Just one more minute, Gran!"

Pearl, as they christened her, was rather confused as to why two young strangers were waving to her in the middle of a train station but decided to wave back with a friendly smile. She also appeared to be a little senile, which was working in their favor.

The ticketing agent shrugged and checked the ticket options. "The only availability we have for three on the next train is in a first-class compartment," she said.

"Great, how much?" Conner asked.

"Two hundred pounds each," the ticketing agent said.

Conner gulped. "Boy, that's a lot of weight, ha-ha," he said. "We'll take it. Good thing Granny Pearl gave us lots of money."

He exchanged cash for the tickets and walked quickly away from the ticketing counter and toward Pearl. Bree glanced over her shoulder and saw the ticketing agent suspiciously glaring at them over her coffee mug.

"She's still watching us; what do we do?" Bree whispered to Conner.

"Grab the old lady and get on the train, I guess," he whispered back.

"We can't kidnap an old woman!"

"What other option do we have?"

Their hearts were racing—they were about to commit the biggest crime of their lives. They leaned down to the old woman and quietly spoke to her.

"Hello there, would you mind doing us a favor?" Conner asked her.

Pearl just smiled blankly at them—he had guessed correctly; she didn't know a lick of English.

"Wer sind Sie?" she asked.

“What did she just say?” Conner asked.

“I think she said, ‘Who are you?’ ” Bree said. “She’s German.”

“You speak German?”

“Only a little bit—my real grandma was born in Germany.”

“Ask her if she wants to go on a trip with us,” Conner said.

Bree licked her lips and tried translating. “Would you like… um… *eine Reise* with *uns*?”

Pearl blinked a couple times, causing her head to move slightly.

“I think that counts as a nod—grab her and let’s go!” Conner whispered.

Bree grabbed the handles of Pearl’s wheelchair and they pushed her toward the security line. Pearl smiled as cheerfully as ever, clearly without the slightest clue what was going on. They handed their tickets to the man at the security check and he carefully looked them over.

“Ich werde entführt,” Pearl told the man casually.

Bree panicked and nervously burst into fake laughter. “Oh, Granny, you’re so funny!” she said loudly. “You’ve been making jokes all day.”

The man handed back their tickets and allowed them to move forward.

“What did she just tell him?” Conner whispered to Bree.

“She said, ‘I’m being kidnapped,’ ” Bree whispered back.

“Oh,” he said, and guiltily looked down at their captive. Pearl’s big smile never left her face. “She’s taking it very well, then.”

They pushed her wheelchair all the way down the platform and boarded the car at the front of the train. The train attendant folded her wheelchair and stowed it with their luggage. Conner and Bree helped Pearl up the steps into the train and into their private first-class compartment. It was very luxurious for a pair of teenage runaways and a kidnapped old woman. It had red cushioned seats and white drapes over a large square window.

They gently sat Pearl down and took the seats across from her. Conner and Bree sat very still and watched Pearl like she was a poisonous animal until the train pulled away from the station. They were convinced at any minute she might start screaming for help, but she never did. Pearl just kept on smiling and contentedly watched the land move outside the window.

The train’s speed gradually increased and soon they were zooming through the English countryside on their way to Paris. Conner found a pamphlet in their compartment and looked at the map on the back of it—it

was exactly like the map in the station.

“So once we reach Paris we’ll switch trains and head to Monte Carlo,” Conner said.

Pearl looked away from the window for a second to tell them, *“Ich liebe Monte Carlo!”*

“I guess she likes Monte Carlo,” Bree translated.

“Okay,” Conner said cautiously, and then continued with his plan. “Then, once we reach Monte Carlo we’ll try to find the Lumière des Etoiles casino and see if my chip means something to anyone there,” he said.

Pearl turned to them again only to say, *“Ich liebe das Lumière des Etoiles!”* Apparently she was a big fan of the casino as well.

“Why are we going to a casino when we should be trying to find a bank?” Bree asked.

“Mother Goose said the poker chip would come in handy,” he explained. “When she gave it to me she said that if I was ever in Monte Carlo I should take it to the roulette table in the northwest corner and bet it on the black. It made no sense to me at the time, but now I think we’ll find something there that will help us. I’ve got a good feeling about this.”

The train went dark as it swooped under the English Channel and the next time they saw light they were in the French countryside. France was only a couple hours from England, but once the train began decelerating into Paris they felt they had entered a completely different world. Paris made Conner and Bree feel like they were living in a painting. Every building was beautifully detailed, like it had been hand sculpted. Many were tall and narrow with iron railings at each of their multiple windows. Soon the train arrived at the Paris station, Gare du Nord.

Conner and Bree helped Pearl off the train and pushed her through the crowded station.

“We need to exchange our pounds for euros,” Bree told Conner. “We won’t be able to buy tickets to Monte Carlo until we do.”

They found a currency-exchange station and traded in all the pounds they had left. They proceeded to the ticketing counter to purchase tickets for the next train to Monte Carlo and once again pretended Pearl was their grandmother to avoid any suspicion.

“Would you like a first-class or an economy compartment, *monsieur*?” the Frenchwoman at the counter asked.

“Economy is fine if it’s available,” Conner said.

“Don’t go cheap on me now, Bailey,” Bree said.

“Fine, *first class*, please.” Conner griped, “I’m gonna be so grounded when I get home.”

Within the hour, Conner, Bree, and Granny Pearl were aboard another train enjoying another first-class cabin. It was a very long and bumpy ride and all three of them slept as much as they could. The train stopped in five or six cities along the way, and about six hours had passed by the time they reached the Monte Carlo station.

They gathered their luggage and Granny Pearl, and headed for the exit. They stepped outside the station and Conner and Bree caught their first sight of Monte Carlo.

The city was gorgeous. A cluster of colorful hotels, resorts, and residences grew down the Monégasque hills and stretched along the ocean side. The salty smell of the ocean was all around them. A bay a little ways along the shoreline was home to hundreds of boats and yachts that bobbed in the bluest water Conner had ever seen.

“So this is where postcards come from,” he said in awe.

It was almost impossible not to enjoy the refreshing breeze and the warm rays of the golden setting sun. Pearl hummed a cheerful tune as they pushed her along the paradisiacal city.

They wandered aimlessly through the streets looking for a directory or a sign that pointed toward the Lumière des Etoiles casino. However, they soon realized the whole city was made up of casinos.

“It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Bree said.

“Why don’t you look it up on your phone?” Conner asked.

“I would but my battery died in Paris,” she said.

Just when they thought their luck had run out, Pearl tugged at Conner’s sleeve and pointed to a building at the end of the street.

“Das Lumière des Etoiles casino!” she said excitedly.

Bree and Conner were so happy they wanted to hug her, but since they still didn’t even know her name they thought that might be too forward and just hugged each other instead.

“Granny Pearl, you’re amazing!” Conner said as they pushed her toward the casino.

The Lumière des Etoiles casino was an enormous building with tall

columns and was topped by a vast glass dome. If it wasn't for the electric sign blinking its name, Conner would have thought it was an old town hall that had been painted a sandy yellow to match the rest of the city.

Conner and Bree had difficulty pushing Pearl's wheelchair up the steps but they managed and then hustled inside. The casino had green marble floors and golden pillars lining the walls. A massive chandelier hung from the dome above and illuminated the sea of slot machines and card tables.

There wasn't a single guest at the casino who was under the age of eighty. Everywhere they looked they saw wheelchairs, walkers, and white hair. Grandmas showed other grandmas pictures of their grandchildren before taking each other's money. Old men showed off faded tattoos they had mistakenly gotten when they were younger. It was like they had stepped into a room full of Pearls.

"No wonder Mother Goose and Pearl like this casino so much," Conner said. "I feel like we've found their natural habitat."

They propped Pearl up in front of a slot machine and gave her a handful of coins to keep her busy. Just as Mother Goose had described, there was a roulette table in the northwest corner. It was the only table in the casino that was completely empty. Conner and Bree walked through the crowd of senior citizens, receiving the strangest looks from them as they did—they stood out like sore thumbs.

They got to the roulette table and Conner reached into his pocket for the poker chip. The roulette dealer wore a white button-down shirt with a black vest and bow tie. He put his hand up to stop them before they said a word.

"Sincerest apologies, *mademoiselle* and *monsieur*, but this table is reserved for special chips only," the dealer said. "And I do not believe either of you are old enough to be in this casino, anyway."

Conner showed him the blue poker chip. The dealer's eyes lit up.

"We didn't come here to gamble," Conner said. "But I would like to bet this on the black."

It must have been code for something because the dealer dropped his hand and raised an eyebrow at the teenagers. He looked at them shrewdly.

"I see," he said. "One moment, please." He picked up the receiver of a telephone under the roulette table. "*Monsieur, nous avons quelqu'un avec un jeton noir,*" he said in French to whoever was on the other end of the phone, and then promptly hung up. "The manager will be with you shortly."

Conner and Bree didn't know whether this was good news or bad. Had the chip actually led them to something useful or were they just going to be escorted out of the casino by the manager?

A moment later the manager of the Lumière des Etoiles casino met them at the roulette table. He was a tall, burly man with a thick black mustache. He wore a sharp suit and straightened his tie as he greeted them.

"Bonjour," the manager said. "I believe I can be of some assistance?"

Conner showed him the poker chip. "Yes, this belongs to our grandmother," he said, and gestured to Pearl over at the slot machine. Pearl had proven to be a great cover thus far so Conner figured she couldn't hurt them here.

"May I?" the manager asked, and opened a hand. Conner handed the chip to him and the manager pulled a magnifying glass out of his lapel and examined the ridges of the side of the chip. "Very well, please follow me," he said, walking away from the roulette table.

Conner and Bree exchanged looks, each wanting the other to go first. Finally Conner followed the manager, with Bree right at his heels.

The manager led them through the casino and into an elevator, politely holding the door open. The elevator had a button for each of the building's five floors above them, but once the doors shut the manager pressed several at once, as if he were entering a secret code. When he was finished, the elevator took Conner and Bree by surprise—it started traveling *down* to an unmarked level.

"Are you enjoying Monte Carlo?" the manager asked casually as the elevator descended.

"Yup," Conner peeped nervously, terrified of where they might be going.

Finally the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. "Right this way," the manager said, and escorted them out of the elevator.

To their amazement, Conner and Bree found themselves at the top level of a gigantic underground courtyard. It was like they were looking at a four-story cell block beneath them, but instead of prison cells the walls were lined with rows of *vaults.*

"So *this* is where her vault is!" Conner said.

"This isn't really a casino, it's a secret bank," Bree said.

"Oh no, it's still one of Monte Carlo's finest casinos," the manager reassured them. "But before it was a casino it was one of the world's

greatest private storage facilities for hundreds of years. The building was bought in the early 1900s on the condition that it remain a working storage facility. The vaults are not rented or leased but purchased in perpetuity, like cemetery plots."

"So there are things inside these vaults that will never be seen again?" Conner asked.

"Usually the vaults and their possessions are inherited, but occasionally we have clients who pass on before naming a benefactor," the manager explained.

"And those people's valuables will just be locked away for the rest of time?"

"Yes," the manager said. "But typically when people lock away something in an underground vault, it's because they don't wish to share it with the world."

Conner and Bree gulped in unison. The thought of what might be behind some of those metal doors gave them the chills.

"Now, please follow me and I'll show you to your grandmother's vault," the manager said.

They followed him down two flights of stairs to the third-highest level.

"Here we are, vault 317," the manager said and stood to the side of the vault door.

"Wait, how do you know for sure this is our vault?" Conner asked.

"Each chip contains a small number on its side, and I examined yours before bringing you down here," the manager explained. "Each chip also acts as a key. The sides are not ridged like normal chips but have several unique grooves and dents. When you place the correct chip into the center of a vault's lock and spin the handles, the vault will open. Place the incorrect chip into a lock and the chip will be destroyed when you spin the handles."

"But how do you know that we're the proper beneficiaries?" Bree asked. "How do you know we didn't steal the chip?"

"That is not a problem," the manager told her. "According to the three-hundred-year-old policy, whoever is in possession of the chip is the rightful beneficiary. We give one chip to each client. If it breaks or gets lost or is stolen, that is not our issue. We avoid many lawsuits and robberies that way."

Conner and Bree nodded their understanding. This was a very strange and serious storage facility; it wasn't a shock that Mother Goose had business here.

"Now please enjoy your time with whatever your vault possesses," the manager said. "It is also policy that I leave the room before you open it, to uphold our guarantee of the absolute privacy of your possessions. Please wait until I have entered the elevator before opening the vault. When you have finished with your possessions, please take the elevator to the main floor."

He spoke so casually even though there was nothing casual about this place. The manager walked off in the direction they had come from. He climbed up the stairs and disappeared into the elevator.

"This place is intense," Conner said.

"This place is awesome," Bree said. "Think about what might be in these vaults—think about *who* might be in these vaults!"

It dawned on Conner that what most people found frightening, Bree found intriguing. And knowing this about her both frightened and intrigued him.

"Fingers crossed this works," Conner said. He put the chip into the vault's lock. He spun the handles around the lock and the door opened with a *pop*. A gust of air carrying mixed scents came with it. Both of his hands were on the handles but he didn't pull the door fully open.

"What are you waiting for?" Bree asked.

"I just thought about all the potentially amazing and horrible things that might be waiting for us inside," he said.

"I know," Bree said. "Too bad my phone is dead; otherwise I'd take pictures."

Conner grunted as he pulled the heavy door open. He and Bree stepped inside the vault and looked around in astonishment at the treasures Mother Goose had acquired over the centuries.

It looked like they were in the storage room of a museum. There were large Egyptian busts, small Fabergé eggs, hundreds of rolled-up scrolls, portraits, canvases, dinosaur bones, clay pots and pans, and even a giant machine gun from World War II.

Conner and Bree began searching through the items. Some of them were so outrageous they completely forgot what they were looking for. Mother

Goose had labeled many of the objects and they had a difficult time believing in their accuracy. A pair of wooden dentures had a note pinned to it that said “George Washington’s teeth.” A large rolled-up scroll was tagged “Map to Atlantis.” A small envelope containing a telegram said “Amelia Earhart’s Forwarding Address.”

Bree’s eyes were practically bulging out of her head when she read the tag on a small goblet. “You don’t think this is actually *the Holy Grail*, do you?” she said, and raised the cup to show Conner.

“Probably not,” Conner said.

Bree sighed with relief and tossed the cup aside. She unrolled a portrait and laughed. “Then this painting labeled ‘The original *Mona Lisa*’ with a note from Leonardo da Vinci probably isn’t real, either,” she said, showing it to him.

“Um… *that* one might be legit,” Conner said, remembering Mother Goose’s da Vinci stories.

Bree suddenly looked like she was holding an explosive in her hands and gently put it back where she found it. Conner was getting distracted by all the things he was finding. He had to keep reminding himself what they were there for.

“I wish Mother Goose wasn’t such a hoarder. It’d be so much easier finding the panpipe if she had learned to recycle,” Conner said. He pushed a stack of ancient maps out of the way and then leaped with excitement when he found a small wooden panpipe hiding underneath them.

“Bree! Get over here and look at this!” Conner yelled. *“I found it! I found it!”*

“You’re amazing!” Bree said, and hugged him tightly. “Does it say what notes need to be played to access the portal?”

Conner inspected the panpipe and found a series of letters carved into the largest cylinder. “It says ‘G-E-F-C, C-E-G-F,’ ” he said. “I’m assuming those are musical notes or maybe it’s how you spell a sneeze.”

“This is terrific! Now all we have to do is get to Neuschwanstein Castle and find the portal!” Bree said.

She was so excited she kissed his cheek and then hurried out of the vault. Conner turned bright red and almost passed out. She made him feel like the most special thing in the room of treasures.

Bree poked her head back into the vault. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Yeah, sorry, be right there!” Conner collected the panpipe and his senses and followed her out.

They shut and carefully locked the vault behind them. Conner tucked the chip safely into his pocket. They rode the elevator up to the casino and thanked the manager for his assistance. As they raced down the front steps they plotted what their next move would be, although it was jarring to see the sun had already set while they were inside.

“Before we left the train station I took a look at the upcoming departures,” Bree said. “If we can make it back in time, there’s a nine o’clock overnight train to Prague that stops in Munich on the way.”

“Perfect,” Conner said. “There’s only one thing we’re missing.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Pearl!” he said.

They turned around and dashed back into the casino. Pearl was still by the slot machine where they had left her. However, she was clutching three buckets full of coins she had won while they were downstairs.

“Nicely done, Pearl,” Bree said.

“Pearl, would you like to go on one last train ride with us?” Conner asked.

The old woman didn’t seem to understand him but she nodded sweetly. Pearl was in it for the ride as much as they were.

They brought her down the front steps of the casino and journeyed to the train station as fast as possible. They made it just in time and were the last ones to buy tickets and board the train. Their compartment wasn’t as nice as the other two had been but they didn’t mind—as long as they were on their way to Germany everything was right in the world.

The compartment door abruptly slid open to reveal an aggressive-looking train attendant. His eyes narrowed when he discovered Conner and Bree behind the door.

“Passports, please,” the attendant demanded.

“Why do you need to see our passports?” Conner asked.

The attendant squinted his eyes at Conner’s reluctance. “We’ve just gotten word of two runaway American teenage tourists,” he said. “It’s protocol to check the identification of every passenger on board the train who matches that description.”

Conner and Bree tensed up. They had come so close to getting to the

portal but there was no way out of this now. Conner wondered if the train was moving too fast to jump out of it.

“But these are my grandchildren,” Pearl said in perfect English.

Conner and Bree turned their heads so quickly they almost gave themselves whiplash. Had she been coherent the entire time?

“I understand that, *madame*, but we still need to check their passports,” the attendant insisted.

“Fine, fine, fine,” Pearl said. “Let me get my purse and I’ll find them for you.”

She slowly went through her bag: one pen, one piece of hard candy, and one coin at a time. She pulled out wads of tissue and folded-up notes and stamped letters she had forgotten to mail. The attendant grew impatient waiting for her to retrieve the passports.

“Where did I put those passports?” Pearl said. “We were just in Monte Carlo and I put them in my pocket, then when we got back on the train I put them in my suitcase—yes, they’re in my suitcase! If you wouldn’t mind kindly waiting another moment, I’ll have a look for them in my suitcase.”

“That’s quite all right, *madame*,” the attendant said. He had run out of patience for the day. “I trust you. Please forgive this disturbance.” He slid the door shut and they heard his footsteps travel down the train.

Pearl put her belongings back into her purse and then looked up at Conner and Bree. Both were staring at her with wide eyes and open mouths as if she were on fire.

“So where are we off to next?” Pearl asked them sweetly.

“Have you been aware of what we’ve been doing this entire time?” Conner asked, completely mortified.

“I’m old but I’m not ancient. I can speak English, too, you know,” she said.

“And you let us take you around the continent willingly?” Bree asked, just as horrified.

“Yes,” Pearl said. “You seemed like nice kids at the train station in London. I wasn’t sure what was going on at first but I knew it would be good fun once we got on the train.”

Conner and Bree looked at each other. Both wore the same bewildered expression.

“I ran away on my own adventure when I was your age,” Pearl said. “I

fell in love with a circus clown named Fabrizio and followed him around the globe."

"Did you get caught?" Bree asked.

"No, and after six months of following him I finally had the courage to tell Fabrizio how I felt," Pearl said.

"What happened?" Conner asked. "Was he creeped out because you were stalking him? Did he break your heart?"

"No, we were married for sixty-four years—until he died," Pearl said. "Back then actions spoke louder than words. We just did what our hearts told us to. These days people act like love is an island—they all want to swim to it but no one wants to get wet."

"What were you doing at the train station in London?" Bree asked.

"I had been visiting my son," she said. "He dropped me off but I wasn't ready to go home yet. I think I'm ready now, though. Disappearing for two days is the perfect amount of time to get your children to value you a bit more. I've enjoyed our little adventure together but I'm very tired and I should probably get off at the next stop and take a train home."

Conner and Bree shook their heads and laughed. "What's your real name, anyway?" Conner asked.

"It's Elsa," she said with a big smile. "But I insist you call me *Granny Pearl*."

Conner and Bree liked the idea of having a new grandma. "Well, our names are—"

"Uh," Pearl interrupted. "If you don't tell me your names, I'll never have to tell anyone where I saw you."

Conner and Bree thought the woman sitting across from them was almost too good to be true.

"You're so much cooler than my real German grandma," Bree said.

"Now, it's none of my business why you're away from your parents, but promise me you'll stay safe while you're having this adventure of yours," Pearl told them. "It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt."

They nodded, knowing it was a promise neither of them could keep.

Chapter Twelve

THE SECRETS OF NEUSCHWANSTEIN CASTLE

The train from Monte Carlo arrived in Munich at six o'clock the next morning, after making a few stops along the way. They tried sleeping as much as they could but didn't manage much rest. Conner and Bree made sure Pearl was safely aboard the train that would take her home before they left the train station.

When Conner and Bree left Germany two days prior, neither would have thought they would be returning so soon. And just like every other city they'd seen so far, Munich proved to be a world of its own. It was a city of spirals and clock towers and pointed roofs. There were beautiful buildings with stained-glass windows and handcrafted wooden doors. Statues of religious and mythical figures were mounted on the roofs and balconies to keep watch over the busy streets.

"I can't believe how close these countries are and yet they're all so different," Conner said.

"And you really don't know a place until you've been there," Bree said. "You can look at a hundred pictures and a dozen maps, but unless you've been to the city and felt its pulse, you really know nothing about it."

Conner couldn't have put it in better words himself. With no time to lose, they brainstormed how they were going to get from Munich to Neuschwanstein Castle.

"I've got some bad news," Conner said. "We're almost out of cash. I've got enough for food for a couple days, but that's about it. I don't know how we're supposed to get to the castle now."

"Don't worry, I've got an idea," Bree said. "Let's find a hotel and pretend we're staying there. Then we'll trick the concierge into giving us what we need."

"Let me guess, this happens in your crime books, too?" Conner asked.

"No, I figured this one out myself," Bree said proudly. "My grandma lives in a condo in Atlantic City next to a bunch of hotels—there were

summers I never paid for lunch once."

They walked up and down the stone streets until Bree found a large and fancy hotel ideal for her plan. The hotel was painted yellow and had the flags of several different countries displayed around its front revolving doors. They pushed through the doors and Bree got in line to speak with someone at the front desk.

Conner waited a few feet behind her; she said she was confident enough to do this alone—or perhaps she just didn't want him hovering over her.

"Guten Morgen, gnädige Frau," the man at the concierge desk said.

"*Guten Morgen*, it's good to see you again," she said, even though she had never seen the man before. "I was wondering if I received any messages while I was out."

"Oh?" the concierge said. He looked awfully confused, like he could have sworn they had never met. "What room number?"

"It's 723," Bree said as if she had told him a hundred times already.

"And what's your name?" he asked.

"Bree Campbell," she said honestly, and acted a little hurt that he hadn't remembered. "But as you *should* know, the room is under my stepfather's name."

"Herr Hueber is your stepfather?" he asked.

"Oh, is *that* the name he checked in under?" Bree said with a massive eye roll. "Please ignore him, he's from Milwaukee. Every time we go someplace new, he likes to trick the locals into thinking he's one of them. He probably checked in with some ridiculous accent, too. *Now about those messages—"*

"Oh yes, of course," the concierge said, and went through the papers on his desk. "No messages for room 723."

Bree pouted and stuck out her bottom lip. "Not even from *Jacob*?" she asked sadly.

Conner did a double take—*who the heck was Jacob?*

"No, I'm sorry," he said.

"That's a shame," she said, then got down to business. "Well, since I'm here, I was wondering if you could tell me the easiest way to Neuschwanstein Castle. My dad has to work all day and I have nothing to do."

"There is a two-hour bus that can take you there," he said.

“Unfortunately, it has already sold out for today and tomorrow.”

Conner slumped after hearing this but Bree quickly thought of plan B.

“Does this hotel rent bikes?” she asked.

“Yes, madame,” the concierge said. He was very happy to finally give her some good news.

“Terrific. I suppose a bike ride around the countryside will have to do,” she said.

“One bike?”

“Make it two, please,” Bree said.

“And charge it to the room?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” Bree said. “And if you could please leave a note for my dad telling him I went on a short bike ride I would really appreciate it.”

“Yes, I’d be happy to,” the concierge said. “I’ll have those bikes brought to the front of the hotel right away.”

“Thank you so much,” Bree said.

Conner had almost forgotten Bree wasn’t actually staying there. He tapped his foot to get her attention. “*We need to know how to get there,*” he whispered.

“Oh, and one last thing,” Bree said to the concierge. “Would you mind highlighting how to get to Neuschwanstein Castle on a map for me? Just in case I can convince my dad to take me there himself when he’s finished with work?”

The concierge nodded, and highlighted the route for her on a small map. She thanked him again and then waited with Conner in the front of the hotel for their bikes to be brought out.

“You’re really good at that,” Conner said. “Like, *scary* good.”

Bree’s head was lost in the map. “Okay, judging from this map, the castle is roughly eighty miles away… meaning we’re gonna be on these bikes *all day,*” she said.

“Oh no,” Conner said, looking down at the suitcase he had been lugging around the entire trip. “What am I supposed to do with Betsy?”

“Just check her at the front desk and tell them you’re with me,” Bree said and handed him her bag to store as well.

“I guess this is where we part, old girl,” he said sadly. He removed the piece of mirror from the suitcase and put it in his jacket pocket. He had just realized that now, with being in Munich, he had taken Betsy on as many

adventures as Bob had before him. He took her back inside and checked her under room 723, not knowing if he would ever see her again.

A man from the hotel brought Conner and Bree each a bike and they began their long ride to Neuschwanstein Castle. Bree took the task of leading. She steered her bike with one hand while constantly looking down at the map in the other.

It took them an hour or so to pedal away from the Munich traffic and enter the German countryside. As soon as they did, the magnificent Alps came into view. They were unbelievably tall, as if they had been painted against the sky. Their sharp and jagged peaks were sprinkled with snow like the white in an old man's beard. They stood imperially like giant soldiers guarding their homeland.

As they rode deeper into the scenery, the ground rose with the Alps' altitude. Conner and Bree looked in wonder at the grassy hills around them. They were convinced Germany was the greenest place on earth.

Occasionally a village appeared beside the road. Each was more picturesque than the last, with their orange roofs set against the high backdrop of the azure sky behind the Alps. The scenery was so beautiful it didn't seem real. Conner never knew the world could be so gorgeous and with every mile of their journey he saw something that reminded him of the Land of Stories and just how much he missed it.

Clouds began to roll in from beyond the mountain peaks and covered the countryside like a thick fluffy gray ceiling. It was hard to tell where the mountains ended and the clouds started.

After a few hours of biking, Conner and Bree pulled into a tiny town called Oberammergau to get a bite to eat. Every one of the cottage-like homes and shops were painted with murals of fairy-tale and religious art as if they were one and the same. Conner and Bree stopped to admire an adorable house painted with iconic scenes from the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

"I could never tell Red about this," Conner said. "She's already got a huge head; I can't imagine how she'd act if she knew she was painted on the buildings of the Otherworld, too."

They were delighted to see how well represented fairy tales were in the center of town. There were statues of trolls and Humpty Dumpty, shops were filled with toys and trinkets and puppets of all the classic storybook

characters, and there was even a small inn called Hotel Wolf, where Conner and Bree chose to eat.

"I feel like we're eating in the Red Riding Hood Kingdom," Conner said over lunch.

"If these people only knew what we knew," Bree said.

Conner looked down at his food. "Yeah…," he mumbled sadly.

"What's the matter with you?" Bree asked.

He was hesitant to tell her what was on his mind. "I would never want anything to happen to my sister or my grandmother or anyone in the Land of Stories," he said. "But there's a part of me that hopes the portal *does* open, so I can see them all again."

Bree smiled gently. "I don't think there's anything wrong with that," she said. "We'll just try to think of the situation as a win-win. If the portal is closed, your friends are safe, and if it's open, at least you'll get to see them again."

"Yeah, while they're being attacked by thousands of French soldiers," Conner said.

"Maybe the soldiers changed their minds while they were in the portal," Bree said. "Two hundred years is a long time for self-reflection; they could have re-thought their whole universe-domination thing."

"Maybe." He shrugged. They both knew it was a slim chance but Conner appreciated the optimism nonetheless. He wished he could live a life where there wasn't always a *cost* or a *choice*—he wished for once that when someone said, "And they lived happily ever after," they meant it.

They finished eating and continued their journey to the castle. It was impossible to keep track of time since the sun was hidden by the clouds. A few hours later, just as their bums and feet started aching from biking all day, they arrived in the village of Hohenschwangau.

Conner and Bree could see the tips of the towers belonging to Neuschwanstein Castle hidden by the trees in the hills above the village. It felt like a giant was peeking at them.

"We made it!" Bree said cheerfully. "And it only took us nine and a half hours!"

"Only?" Conner asked, groaning as he dismounted his bike. "I think I'm going to have a bicycle-seat-shaped dent in my butt for the rest of my life."

Hohenschwangau was an incredibly tiny place and mainly consisted of

restaurants, inns, and souvenir shops for tourists visiting Neuschwanstein. The village was also home to another, smaller and older castle that sat on a hill across from Neuschwanstein. It was square and golden and almost completely forgotten by the travelers roaming the village.

Glass kiosks lined in the center of the village sold tours of Neuschwanstein. A long line of tourists waited outside for buses that took them up the path into the hills and to the castle.

“Okay, I think I’ve got a plan,” Conner said. “We’ll go on a tour of the castle and stay in the very back of our group so we’re easily forgettable. When no one is looking, we find the perfect place to hide. Then at night, when all the guides and guests have gone, we give ourselves a tour of the castle and try to find the portal.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan!” Bree said.

They chained their bikes to a bike rack and went to purchase their tickets. But just as they walked up to the kiosks, a sign written in many languages was placed in the window:

ALLE TOUREN VON SCHLOSS NEUSCHWANSTEIN SIND FÜR DEN REST DES TAGES AUSVERKAUFT

ALL TOURS OF NEUSCHWANSTEIN CASTLE ARE SOLD OUT FOR THE REST OF THE DAY

TOUS LES BILLETS POUR LES VISITES DU CHÂTEAU DE NEUSCHWANSTEIN ONT ETE VENDUS POUR LE RESTE DE LA JOURNEE

TUTTI I TOUR DI NEUSCHWANSTEIN CASTELLO SONO ESAURITI PER IL RESTO DELLA GIORNATA

“Oh no!” Conner exclaimed. “What are we supposed to do now?”

“Let’s see if we can get a better look at the castle,” Bree said. “Maybe there’s a window or something we could sneak into.”

They walked down the road a little ways away from the village, and

more of the castle's towers came into view.

"It's no use looking at it from down here, we'll have to go up the hill and get a closer look," Conner said.

He tried his best to fight the disheartening thoughts creeping over him, but the situation wasn't looking great. If the street below the castle was *that* crowded, the castle must be packed with people. It would be impossible to snoop around without looking suspicious.

Conner closed his eyes and prayed for a miracle. They just needed a way inside the castle, that was all! The fate of the fairy-tale world depended on what they might find inside. Luckily for Conner, there was still a bit of magic in his blood and it must have been listening to his request.…

"Hey, Conner," Bree whispered. *"That kid over there keeps staring at us."*

Conner turned in the direction she was referring to. A few yards ahead of them beside the road was a tiny cottage-like house. A boy sat on its front steps unapologetically watching them. He was very young, no older than ten, and had dark hair and very pale skin. He was skinny although his cheeks were plump and rosy, making him look like a puppet that lived in a cuckoo clock.

"Hi," Conner said, and waved awkwardly at their observer.

"Hello," the boy said in a cute German accent. "Are you guys American?"

"We are," Bree said.

A big grin stretched between his rosy cheeks and he giddily sat up.

"Do you like the United States?" Conner asked him.

"Yes!" the boy said with an animated nod. "That's where all the superheroes are from!"

"Have you ever been there?" Bree asked.

The boy's shoulders sank. "No," he said. "I go to school in Füssen down the road but other than that I've never been very far from here. But I'm saving all my money so I can visit Gotham City one day!"

Conner and Bree looked at each other like he was a precious puppy they wanted to keep.

"What's your name?" Conner asked. They walked up closer to his house to visit with him some more.

"My name is Emmerich," he was happy to tell them. "Emmerich

Himmelsbach. What are your names?”

“I’m Conner and this is my friend Bree.”

“What brings you to Hohenschwangau?” he asked, and then quickly corrected himself. “Oh, that was a silly question; you’re here to see the castle, right? Everybody always comes to see the castle.”

“Yes,” Bree said. “Have you been inside it before?”

“Oh, *many, many, many* times!” he told them. “My grandfather used to give tours of the castle and my mother works at a gift shop in the village. So there isn’t anything I don’t know about the place.”

“Well, we *were* here to see the castle,” Conner said dejectedly. “We rode bikes all the way from Munich but the tickets are sold out.”

This completely blew Emmerich’s mind and he almost fell over just hearing it. “You rode bikes all the way from *Munich*?” he said with enormous gestures. “Why would you do that?”

An idea suddenly came to Conner’s mind. He looked at Bree and she could see the light in his eyes. She was prepared to go along with whatever it was he was thinking.

“Well, we would tell you but we wouldn’t want to endanger you,” Conner said.

“Yes, you’re far too young,” Bree added.

Emmerich’s eyes grew and his mouth fell open. “Tell me *what*?” he asked.

“I’m afraid we can’t tell you,” Conner said. “It would blow our cover if anyone were to ever find out.”

“What are you covering up?” Emmerich asked, desperate to know. “You can tell me—I don’t have any friends to tell!”

Conner and Bree looked at each other; they had him right where they wanted him.

“Well, we came to Germany to *hide something*,” Conner said. “We were hired by the United States government because no one would ever suspect kids of traveling with *it*.”

Emmerich put his hands on his cheeks; the curiosity was eating him alive. “What are you trying to hide?” he asked.

Conner pulled the panpipe from his jacket pocket and showed it to him. *“This.”*

Emmerich gasped before knowing what it was. “Wait, what is that?”

“It looks like a panpipe, but it’s actually a weapon,” Bree said. “And a very bad man wants to get his hands on it.”

“And you want to hide it in *Hohenschwangau*?!” Emmerich asked.

They nodded. “We were going to hide it in the castle,” Conner said. “That way no one would ever suspect it was anything but a historical item—but since there aren’t any more tours, we’ll just have to hide it somewhere else.”

“Sorry to bother you, Emmerich,” Bree said. “But we need to get going now. We need to be out of the country by nightfall so they don’t find us.”

They turned to leave but Emmerich ran to stand in front of them.

“No, wait, please!” he said. “I can take you into Neuschwanstein if you want!”

“But how can you do that?” Conner asked.

Emmerich looked around to make sure no one could hear him. “I know a secret passage into the castle,” he explained. “My grandfather took me there once.”

Conner’s and Bree’s spirits soared hearing this, but they had to remain calm to keep their cover.

“I don’t know, I would hate to put your life in danger, Emmerich,” Bree said.

“But I’m putting my own life in danger by offering!” he pleaded. “Please! I can even keep an eye on it for you after you leave!”

They took a few steps away and huddled with their backs to him, pretending to think it over.

“You’re a genius!” Bree whispered to Conner. *“What are the chances we would find someone who could lead us to a secret passage into the castle?”*

“Yeah, what are the chances?” Conner whispered back with a smile. He knew deep down there was a bit of fairy magic inside of him, although he would never have admitted it openly.

They forced their excitement to fade from their faces and went back to Emmerich.

“All right, Emmerich, if you promise never to tell anyone about this, we’ll let you take us to the castle,” Conner said.

Emmerich jumped up and down. This was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him in his young life. “I knew there was something

special about you," he said. "I've seen enough movies to know a secret agent when I see one! When do you want to go?"

"Sometime after dark," Bree said. "So no one will see us there."

"Great! I can meet you at Mary's Bridge after dinner, in an hour or two," Emmerich said. "My mom would kill me if I missed dinner, even if it was to help save the world."

"Sounds good," Conner said. "Where is Mary's Bridge?"

"It's up the path to the castle," Emmerich said. "There are signs to guide you, you can't miss it. It has the best views of the castle."

"Terrific, we'll meet you there," Bree said.

Emmerich was bouncing and his cheeks were extra rosy. "I can't wait!" he said, but then became very still when another thought occurred to him. "If I'm leaving after dinner, I better clean my room before my mother gets home!"

He hurried past them and ran up the steps into his house. Conner and Bree sighed with relief at the same time.

"So far we've run away from our principal, kidnapped an old lady, lied to a concierge, and tricked an innocent German boy into believing we're secret agents," Bree listed. "Does that make us bad people?"

"Nah," Conner said, shaking his head. "Sometimes you have to do the wrong thing for the right reason. Now let's go check out this bridge. I'm anxious to see this castle."

They returned to the village and followed the road up to the castle. There were many signs pointing to the various things that could be seen in the hills, but they followed the arrows that said "Marienbrücke" ("Mary's Bridge").

The bridge was very long and narrow. It was wood with an iron railing and stretched from one cliff to another. Several tourists braved the bridge and took pictures of the mountains and forest around it. Conner and Bree faced mild cases of vertigo during their first steps onto the bridge—they weren't expecting to see a waterfall and stream several hundred feet below.

When they got to the middle of the bridge they looked out and saw Neuschwanstein Castle in its entirety for the first time.

"Oh my gosh," Bree gasped, and put her hands over her mouth.

"I can't… I can't… I c-c-can't believe I'm seeing this right now," Conner stuttered.

It was easy to believe Neuschwanstein Castle was referred to as one of the wonders of Europe. It was a massive white structure with thousands of windows, dozens of tall towers, pointed roofs, and sharp spirals the color of the night sky. The castle sat on a stone base surrounded by trees at the peak of the hill, which made it look like it was growing out of the mountainside.

Conner had seen many impressive structures in the Land of Stories but never in his *own world.* Neuschwanstein Castle had been built brick by brick with the hands of man, using no magic whatsoever.

"I would say this is amazing but that would be an understatement," he said.

"You're right, there really are no words," Bree said. "It's funny that we're the only ones who know there's a portal into the fairy-tale world inside—you would think it's obvious."

Conner couldn't agree more. The luscious green mountains surrounding it, the clear lakes reflecting the thick gray clouds in the sky, and the small villages miles into the horizon made him feel like he was looking at something otherworldly. It was as if a piece of the fairy-tale world had penetrated through the seam of the Otherworld and had been named Bavaria.

The few short hours they waited for Emmerich to arrive went by quickly as they took in the sights around them. Night had fallen over the German countryside and the tourists slowly disappeared until Conner and Bree were the last ones on the bridge. They saw a small light in the trees and soon Emmerich emerged, walking toward them with a flashlight in his hand.

"*Guten Abend,"* Emmerich said. "Are you ready to explore the castle?"

Emmerich led them to a path that crisscrossed down the hillside to an observation deck near the waterfall. They crawled over the railing of the deck and then followed the stream all the way down to the bottom of the hill the castle was perched on.

"Careful, don't get your shoes wet," Emmerich warned them. The closer they got to the hill, the farther the stream flowed into the land beside it, like an overflowing bathtub.

The bridge, the castle, and the mountains disappeared from view behind the thick trees that surrounded the base of the hill. Built into the side of the hill, disguised by a layer of dirt and rocks, was a round door. Emmerich felt around for its steel handle and then heaved the door open.

“This way,” Emmerich said happily.

Conner and Bree crawled through the door after him and into a long stone tunnel. The tunnel twisted and turned for what felt like miles under the castle. Without Emmerich’s flashlight, it would have been pitch-black. Eventually the three arrived at the end of the tunnel and Emmerich pushed through another circular door and into the small storage room of a gift shop.

“This used to be the servants’ quarters,” Emmerich said. “Now stay close behind me, I just have to go punch in the code before the alarm goes off.”

They went past the gift shop and into a hall dedicated to the history of the castle’s construction and design. A large replica of the castle sat in the middle of the hall and the walls were covered with photos of the castle being built and illustrations of its early concept art.

Emmerich found a keypad behind one of the photos and typed in a long code. A green light blinked when he was finished.

“Neuschwanstein is ours!” Emmerich said.

“All right, Emmerich, take us on a tour,” Conner said. “We want to see everything.”

Emmerich marched them down the hall and up a spiral staircase, and the lavishness of the castle began. The circular walls around the staircase were covered in wallpaper patterned with dragons and symbols they didn’t recognize.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Conner said.

“Me too,” Bree said. “I love it!”

“A lot of people think it’s haunted,” Emmerich said. “Many visitors have claimed to see ghosts moving past the windows at night or hear sounds coming from inside when it’s completely empty.”

Conner gulped and Bree grinned. At the top of the stairs they passed a statue of a dragon standing like an overgrown watchdog guarding the hallway.

“I’ll show you the throne room first,” Emmerich said, and guided them down the hallway.

Every inch of the hallway was decorated in wallpaper of diamond, checkered, or floral design. Pillars with animal carvings sat in the arches of the windows and each window was lined with gold. The colors may have faded over the years, but the castle remained a spectacle even more than a

century later.

Emmerich escorted them through an open doorway and into the throne room. It had a towering domed ceiling. A gigantic chandelier hung from the ceiling and was rimmed with hundreds of wax candles. The walls were covered in beautiful paintings of mythological and religious figures. Every species of the animal kingdom appeared in the mosaic floor as if the circle of life was right under their feet.

Colorful arches and pillars surrounded the throne room. Balconies wrapped around the top of the room, facing a high platform under a large mural of Jesus Christ. The platform was the perfect place for a throne, but it was empty.

“So if this is the throne room, where’s the throne?” Bree asked.

“He never had one,” Emmerich said. “King Ludwig II had an extravagant throne made to match this room but he was declared insane before it was finished.”

“So the king never got to sit on his throne?” Conner asked. “That’s tough.”

“Most of the castle remains unfinished,” Emmerich said. “Ludwig was spending all of Bavaria’s money to build his luxurious homes and when that began running out he started borrowing money from other countries to complete them.”

“I can see how that might lead to a bad reputation,” Bree said.

Conner had been studying every square inch of the castle as they went, searching for anything that could possibly be the portal, but he wasn’t finding anything that rang a bell in the throne room.

“Do you think this room would be a good place for the weapon?” Emmerich whispered even though they were the only three in the castle.

“No, not here,” Conner said. “Let’s keep looking.”

“I’ll show you King Ludwig’s bedroom next,” Emmerich said.

They followed him back into the hall and entered a pair of heavy wooden doors. The king’s bedroom was covered from floor to ceiling in remarkable wooden craftsmanship. Everything from the washstand to the desk to the bed frame displayed intricate carvings of disciples, nobility, and harvest. Murals of *Tristan and Isolde*, one of the king’s favorite stories, covered the areas of the walls not decorated in wood.

Then they took a quick look at a small artificial grotto tucked between

two rooms; it was as if the king had kept a tiny cave in his closet. But even that wasn't appealing enough for Conner.

"See any place that works?" Emmerich asked.

Bree was just as interested; she wasn't entirely sure what they were supposed to be looking for, either. However, it wasn't something Conner could explain—part of recognizing a portal was being able to feel it.

"Not yet," Conner said. "I'll know it when I see it."

"Then I'll take you to the Singer's Hall next! There are many things to see there!" Emmerich said.

They returned to the spiral staircase and walked up to the fifth floor of the castle. When they walked into the Singer's Hall the first thing they heard was the sound of their footsteps echoing back at them. The hall was by far the largest room in the castle and stretched long and wide.

The Singer's Hall was such an over-stimulating sight it took Conner and Bree a few moments to differentiate all the artwork. The whole hall seemed to blend into one giant piece of art composed of paintings, statues, busts, carvings, engravings, and symbols of King Ludwig's favorite myths and legends. There were depictions of knights in shining armor, damsels in distress, royal weddings, and the punishment of evildoers. Candelabras lined the perimeter of the room while enormous chandeliers hung from the high ceiling.

Bree was looking up at a woman in one of the portraits. "Has anyone ever noticed that every woman in an old portrait looks like she's being tricked into something?" she asked.

"They still use this room," Emmerich said. "They fill it with chairs and instruments and put on concerts and performances to this day. This would be a convenient place to store your panpipe."

Hearing this struck a chord with Conner. Emmerich was right; it would make sense for the panpipe to be affiliated with this room. If Conner had built the castle, he would certainly have put a panpipe that gave access to a portal in a room that had something to do with music. The portal *had* to be in the Singer's Hall—he could feel it.

At the far side of the room was a platform four steps high. Four pillars of dark red marble stood on the front of the platform and held three colorful arches above them. Behind the pillars and arches, covering the wall, was the largest painting in the room. It was of a majestic forest with trees, flowers,

squirrels, deer, and boulders.

Conner couldn't take his eyes off this area of the room. The painting looked familiar to him, like a place he had seen with his sister. There was something intriguing and inviting about it that he couldn't explain in words.

"What is this painting of?" Conner said.

"That's a painting of a magic garden," Emmerich said. "I don't know what it's from, though."

Conner smiled on the inside and out. "I do," he said, and then looked at Bree. "I think I've found it."

Bree and Emmerich joined him at the back of the room. They stood by his side and all three of them gazed at the painting behind the pillars.

"You want to put the weapon in there?" Emmerich asked excitedly.

Conner decided to tell his young tour guide the truth. "Emmerich, it's not really a weapon," he said. "And we're not really secret agents."

Emmerich looked sadly at the floor. "I know," he said. "But I thought it would be fun to pretend with you guys. I don't get many chances to have fun with other kids; everyone who comes to Hohenschwangau is only here for a day and then they always leave."

It broke Conner's and Bree's hearts a little to hear this. He was the second person on their trip to *let* them manipulate him or her due to loneliness. Bree leaned down so she could look him right in the eyes.

"Don't worry, Emmerich," she said. "We have to check something out now, and if it works, it's going to be much cooler than anything secret agents could show you."

Emmerich looked curious. Bree nodded to Conner and he took the panpipe from his jacket pocket. He looked over the notes carved into the back of it and double-checked that he knew which cylinder played which note.

"The middle cylinder should be middle C," Bree said. "At least that's how it works on a piano—my mom made me take lessons when I was younger."

"Here goes," Conner said. He blew the first four notes into the pipe and then paused for a second before blowing the remaining four. They were pure and chilling in the empty castle.

The notes echoed through the hall like all the noises they had made—only the notes never stopped. The sound only increased more and more,

causing the whole hall to vibrate. The chandeliers above them began to sway and the floor started rumbling.

"What's happening?" Emmerich shouted. He covered his ears and looked around the hall in absolute horror.

Suddenly a bright flash of light appeared between the two pillars in the center of the platform. The light grew and started to swirl; the larger it became, the faster it spun. Soon the entire back of the hall was covered in the light.

"Oh no," Conner said, and locked eyes with Bree. *"It works!* We can access it from our side. That means the portal *has* re-opened and the French soldiers are—"

The three of them jolted forward against their will. The light had abruptly turned into a swirling vortex and was *pulling them inside it.*

"Run!" Conner yelled.

The three of them ran for the other side of the hall, but the vortex's pull was too strong. Emmerich grabbed Bree, Bree grabbed Conner, and Conner grabbed one of the candelabras bolted to the wall. They dangled in the air as the vortex only grew stronger. Emmerich lost his hold on Bree, Bree lost her grasp of Conner, and Conner's grip slipped from the candelabra.

All three of them flew through the air and were sucked into the circling light. Conner, Bree, and Emmerich disappeared into the vortex and vanished from Neuschwanstein Castle.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE EVICTED QUEEN

The weeks following the Fairy Inaugural Ball turned out to be quite enjoyable for Alex. She attended the Fairy Council meetings every day, she rode Cornelius on her daily trips around the kingdoms to see who needed the helping hand of a fairy, and then she spent the evenings going on long walks with Rook through the woods. She couldn't decide which part of her day she liked best—except on the days when their walks ended with a good-night kiss: Then the walk was definitely her favorite part.

After weeks of agonizing over the ball and days spent worrying about Rook, Alex was so happy she could finally enjoy herself again. It had been so long since she was content about anything she had almost forgotten what relief felt like. She had been so occupied she hadn't even thought to ask Conner how his trip to Germany was.

However, as enjoyable as her carefree days were, she knew they were most likely limited. And one afternoon Alex received a letter from Red that proved just that.

Dearest Alex,

Congratulations on graduating Fairy School or whatever it was you've recently accomplished—I'm very proud of you! I'm positive you'll be a wonderful addition to the League of Fairies or whatever it is you're a part of now.

I'm writing to you because I need a favor. That dreadful Peep woman has struck again! She convinced the House of Progress to organize a debate between us before the polls open tomorrow afternoon. Isn't that the most barbaric thing you've ever heard of? What kind of kingdom wants to watch their ruler defend herself against a series of vicious personal attacks on her character? Do the words nobility and grace not go hand in hand anymore?

Anyway, I was wondering, if you weren't too busy with Fairy Court, if you wouldn't mind attending the debates in my support. Having a fairy publicly on my side would do a lot

for my image, and when the election results come in tomorrow evening and Little Bo Peep loses, you can turn her into a pumpkin and we can take turns smashing her with a sledgehammer.

Warmest wishes,

Her Majesty, Queen Red Riding Hood of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom

P.S. Charlie says hello. He's been guiding me through all of this campaign ridiculousness. I convinced the House of Progress to let him moderate the debate. He hopes to see you, too!

The letter had been delivered personally by one of Red's messengers and he looked very tired after traveling all night to deliver it.

"Please tell Queen Red I'll be there." Alex sighed.

Later that evening, Alex told Rook about the letter while they were on their walk.

"Are you going to tell Red what we saw in Little Bo's barn?" Rook asked her.

"No, I don't think I will," Alex said. "I can't fault Little Bo for not having noble intentions when Red doesn't exactly have the noblest intentions, either."

"So does that mean I won't be seeing you for our walk tomorrow?" Rook asked, making sad-puppy eyes at her.

"Probably not," Alex said. "But I'll see you the day after."

"That's all right, my father and I are pulling weeds tomorrow and that usually takes up the majority of the day." Rook let out a pitiful laugh.

"What's so funny?" Alex asked.

"I just compared our days in my head," Rook said. "You're going to be part of an election that will change a kingdom's future and I'm pulling weeds."

"We all do our part," Alex teased. "But if it's any consolation, Red's problems are a lot like weeds. No matter how many times you pull them, they just keep coming back."

The following afternoon Alex rode Cornelius into the Red Riding Hood Kingdom and arrived in town just as the debate was about to begin. From a distance it looked like the entire kingdom had been painted red, but when Alex got closer she realized it wasn't *paint* the town was covered in. Every

shop, home, and tree was covered in Red's campaign posters.

The majority of them said VOTE FOR QUEEN RED and had a sketch of Red on them. Others were a bit catchier and said KEEP THE KINGDOM FED, VOTE FOR QUEEN RED or, A KINGDOM THIS GREAT MUST BE DOING SOMETHING RIGHT, VOTE FOR QUEEN RED. Others completely slandered Little Bo and said DON'T BE A CREEP, DON'T VOTE FOR PEEP or, more subtly, PEEP LOSES SHEEP.

Alex tried to find posters in Little Bo's favor but couldn't see any. She clearly wasn't campaigning as hard as Red, or perhaps all her posters had been covered by Red's.

The park in the center of the kingdom was lined with voting booths. Two podiums were set up on the House of Progress's front steps where most of the kingdom had gathered on the ground below. The representatives were seated at the bottom of the steps, privileged to have front-row seats to the debate.

Alex let Cornelius graze in the park and met Froggy at the steps. He paced around nervously, holding a stack of cards in his hands.

"Is she ready for this?" Alex asked him.

"As ready as she can be. I've been coaching her all week."

"I'm sure you were an amazing teacher," Alex said, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I really love Red and I think she's an amazing queen in her own way," he said. "Her confidence is contagious and it's good for the kingdom. Getting others to see it that way is the challenge."

Queen Red and Little Bo emerged from inside the House of Progress and were greeted by warm applause as they walked down the steps to their respective podiums. Red moved a little faster than Little Bo and walked in front of her, taking in all the applause for herself.

Alex had a seat with the representatives and Froggy addressed the crowd.

"Hello, Hoodians, and welcome to the first electoral debate in the history of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom," Froggy said. "Our candidates will each be given a chance to express why they feel deserving of your votes and then we will conclude the debate with questions submitted by citizens from around the kingdom. Let's begin!"

Froggy took his position on the lower steps below the podiums and the

debate began. Queen Red was the first to try to persuade the kingdom to vote for her.

“Fellow Hoodians,” she declared. “That has such a nice ring to it, don’t you think? What will you be called if Little Bo sits on the throne—*the Peepers*? I bet you would dislike that as much as I would dislike it. Now I know my opponent is going to spend the next few minutes telling you all *she understands you* and she’s *one of you* and *blah, blah, blah*… and you know what, she’s right!”

The citizens were shocked to hear Red take this approach. Alex was afraid of where she was taking this.

“Little Bo Peep is just like you. And I couldn’t be more *different* from you,” Red continued. “But that’s how you like your queen! You want your queen to *represent you*, not be one of you. That’s why I was elected queen when I was a little girl, because as a young innocent victim I *symbolized* you. And now that our kingdom has become the prosperous nation it is today, I symbolize *that*. When other kingdoms think about the Red Riding Hood Kingdom, do you want them thinking about a leader who carries around a staff and probably does her own cooking and cleaning? *No!* You want them thinking of a rich and beautiful and fearless queen because *that* is what the Red Riding Hood Kingdom is! Thank you.”

Red finished her speech and struck a pose with her hands in the air. Her citizens had been trained well enough by now to know they were supposed to applaud whenever she did this.

Little Bo cleared her throat; it was her turn to convince the citizens to vote for her.

“The reason I didn’t put campaign posters up is the same reason I won’t bore you with a long speech now: It’s a waste of time,” Little Bo said. “Queen Red may waste your time and your resources, but I will not.”

A quiet whispering broke out through the crowd. Red was appalled by Little Bo’s response. She kept looking into the crowd expecting someone to say Little Bo was breaking the rules. Little Bo stayed as calm and collected as ever. She definitely wasn’t the emotional mess Alex had seen in the barn a few weeks earlier. Red was desperate to get the crowd back on her side.

“May I just remind everyone that when I was younger and surviving horrendous attacks by wild creatures, *Miss High-and-Mighty* over there couldn’t even keep track of her own sheep!” Red said. “And then her own

sheep felt so sorry for her they came *back*, wagging their tails behind them, so she wouldn't feel so pathetic. And now *this woman* wants to be queen."

The spectators hooted and hollered at Red's feisty response—the debate was getting interesting. Froggy slapped his hand against his forehead. Alex could tell he had tried coaching her against having outbursts like this.

"For the queen's information, I lost my flock of sheep *one time* and it was a traumatic experience that inspired me to single-handedly turn my family's farms into the most productive in the kingdom," Little Bo stated. "We are now the number one wool-producing business in the world and, thanks to the flawless counting system I invented, my farm has *never* lost a sheep since."

Red greeted this response with an impressive eye roll. "Well, if traumatic experiences make someone a bigger person, I'm surprised I even fit through the doors of my own castle," she said. "I was inside the stomach of the Big Bad Wolf—inside him! Surely that deserves a little more credit than just being absentminded—"

"You walked into that forest wearing a bright red cape and carrying a basket of freshly baked goods," Little Bo interrupted. "You were *asking* to be attacked by a wolf, and then we elected you queen. If a fish jumped into a boat with a hook in its mouth, would we have elected him king?"

A sprinkling of people in the crowd grunted their protest, feeling Little Bo was insulting their judgment now. Red quickly milked this for all it was worth.

"Are you telling the Hoodian people here today that they were wrong to elect me queen?" Red asked.

Little Bo's eyes darted around the crowd, who grew more insulted by the second. It was her turn to get them back on her side.

"What I'm trying to say is, Queen Red may have been a symbol at one point, but the Big Bad Wolves are gone now," Little Bo said. "The times have changed and so should the leader of this kingdom. The kingdom may have needed a symbol then, but we need a ruler now."

A hush fell over the crowd. The citizens started to look at Little Bo differently now, not just as someone brave enough to challenge the queen, but as a true leader.

"Let's read some of the questions," Froggy said. "We'll start with Queen Red and then Little Bo will follow. The first question is, *How will you help*

the farmers whose crops freeze in the winter?”

Red perked up like she knew the perfect answer. “Not only would I supply the farmers with coats, I would supply their crops with coats as well,” she said happily.

The entire crowd squinted at her—was she serious?

“I would supply the farmers with mulch to give their crops a better chance of withstanding the cold as well as barrels of heated water to keep the crops from freezing over,” Little Bo said. The citizens nodded to one another—they liked her answer better. Froggy moved on to the next question.

“Now Little Bo will answer first, followed by Queen Red,” he prefaced. *“How will you make school a more meaningful experience for the children of our kingdom?”*

Little Bo was prepared with an answer. “You can only learn so much in a classroom,” she said. “I would invite the children to my farm or have them visit the shops in town so they can experience different workplaces before choosing a field to go into—and it would give our poor overworked teachers a rest once in a while.”

This answer was welcomed with a soft round of applause from the teachers in the crowd. Red thought about her answer before giving it.

“Actually, I like her answer,” she said with a confident nod. “Yes, I would do the same.”

Alex sighed—she didn’t think this was going to end well for her friend.

“Next question,” Froggy said, and flipped to the next card. “Queen Red will answer first. *What is your take on national security?*”

Red placed her index finger over her mouth while she formed an answer. Alex crossed her fingers, hoping she would deliver an answer the citizens could get behind.

“I like it!” was all Red said, and a large smile grew on her face.

Alex covered her eyes; it was like watching a carriage wreck. A few citizens even laughed at Red. Little Bo waited a moment before answering the question herself, letting Red’s embarrassment marinate.

“I believe the key to national security is having a strong army,” Little Bo said. “No kingdom has ever experienced a downfall because it was too strong.”

The Hoodian citizens started a round of healthy applause for Little Bo.

“Bo Peep! Bo Peep! Bo Peep!” the crowd chanted. *“Bo Peep! Bo Peep!”*

Red looked sadly over her citizens; she didn’t understand where she had gone wrong. Froggy immediately concluded the debate before it got worse for her.

“We’d like to thank you all for joining us in this debate,” Froggy said. “Please cast your vote in one of the many voting booths in the park.”

While the citizens voted for a queen, Alex and Froggy kept Red company in the library of her castle. They were all on pins and needles waiting to hear the results of the election. Alex and Froggy sat in the large comfy chairs by the fireplace but Red had been pacing for hours since they’d returned from the debate. Clawdius watched her sadly from a corner of the room, looking as if he wished there was something he could do.

“Little Bo is a pain in the shepherdess!” Red shouted, loud enough for her whole castle to hear. “She’d never be half the queen I am. Would *she* have been chased by a pack of wolves and lived to tell the tale? *No!* Would she have gotten into a flying ship and sailed around the world trying to save it? *No!* Could she have chopped down a beanstalk to save her citizens from being devoured by a giant man-eating cat? *No!* Would *she* have refused to surrender her kingdom to the Enchantress? *No!* Does anyone except me remember the things I’ve done for this country?”

“Maybe they do, darling,” Froggy said. “You have to be patient and hear what the results are. Don’t declare your defeat yet.”

“Your people might have more faith in you than you have in them,” Alex said. “Just believe in them as much as they’ve always believed in you.”

This comforted Red a little bit and the distance of her pacing shortened. There was a knock on the door and the third Little Pig entered the room. Froggy and Alex stood from their seats and Red stopped pacing altogether.

“Good evening, Your Majesty,” he said.

“Have the votes been counted?” Froggy asked.

“Yes, they have,” the third Little Pig said.

The room grew uncomfortably tense and Red didn’t know what else to do but laugh. “Good,” she said, pretending it wasn’t a big deal. “Has all this election business finally been settled, then? Can we let Little Bo Peep know that I’m here to stay?”

The third Little Pig hesitated to respond and Alex and Froggy knew it

hadn’t gone in her favor. Red was about to hear the worst news of her life.

“Actually, Little Bo Peep has been elected the new queen,” the pig said.

Red fell into the closest seat and clutched her chest; her heart had just broken into a million pieces. “I’m sorry,” she said, trying to fight the tears forming in her eyes. “Can you repeat that?”

“Little Bo Peep has been elected the new queen, ma’am,” the pig said again.

Froggy had a seat next to Red and held her hand tightly. Alex placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder. Clawdius came and sat by her feet. Even though Red had heard the news twice she still had a hard time comprehending it.

“This isn’t possible,” Red said, shaking her head. “This is *my* kingdom. It has *my* name, after all.”

“Actually, ma’am, the kingdom is going to be re-named,” the pig told her regretfully, as if she hadn’t heard enough bad news already.

“To what?” Alex asked.

“The Bo Peep Republic.”

Red forced a laugh again. “Well, that’s a ridiculous name,” she said, desperately needing to make light of the situation for her own good.

“When does Little Bo officially take over?” Froggy asked.

“In one week,” the pig said. “She’s kindly asked that Red Riding Hood have all of her belongings out of the castle by then.”

Even Red couldn’t hold a stoic face after hearing this. She burst into tears and buried her face in Froggy’s shoulder.

“I’ll give you a moment to yourselves,” the pig said, and left the room.

Sometimes it was difficult to be around Red when she was happy, but Alex had never expected it would be so painful to watch her be so miserable. Red sobbed for the rest of the evening. Her spirit had been broken and Alex was afraid it might never be salvaged.

“But I’m the queen…,” she cried into Froggy’s arms. *“I’m the queen… I’m the queen.…”*

Seven days, one thousand dresses, eight hundred pairs of shoes, five

hundred paintings, twenty-eight statues, and one wolf later, the entire castle had been cleared of any trace of Red Riding Hood. She spent her last moments in the castle alone in her empty bedroom looking at the bare walls she had once called home. She was so depressed all she wore was a simple red dress and a matching overcoat.

There was a soft knock on her door and Froggy peeked inside. “All the carriages are loaded, darling,” he said. “It’s time to go.”

“All right, then,” Red said, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. She stood up and somberly left the room. She shut the door behind her, not only to her old bedroom, but to her life as queen.

Froggy gave her his arm and escorted her down the grand staircase and through the castle. All of the servants lined the walls as she passed. They respectfully bowed to her one final time. Red and Froggy walked outside, where a parade of twelve carriages jam-packed with Red’s belongings was waiting for them.

The carriages were very plain wooden—much different from the luxurious ones Red was used to traveling in.

Froggy and Clawdius climbed into the first carriage and waited for Red. She looked up at the castle and admired the towers and windows she had personally designed. She thought about the happy and not-so-happy memories she had lived through inside and said good-bye to it all.

The parade of carriages left the Red Riding Hood Kingdom and traveled into the Fairy Kingdom to the Fairy Palace. Alex had invited Red to stay with her for a few days while she figured out what the next step in her life would be. Alex had to magically shrink Red’s belongings so she could place them inside a tiny cupboard; otherwise they never would have fit in the palace.

Alex took Red, Froggy, and Clawdius up to the grand balcony of the Fairy Palace, hoping the remarkable view might cheer Red up.

“I suppose I took things for granted,” Red said. She hadn’t looked at the view once, her eyes cast down at the floor. “Just like I expected the sky to always be blue, I expected to always be queen.”

“We have to take some things for granted every now and then,” Alex told her friend. “Otherwise we would live life afraid of losing everything.”

Clawdius whimpered on the floor at their feet—even he missed the castle. Froggy had been quiet since they arrived and hadn’t been acting

himself. He looked like he was getting sick but didn't have any symptoms yet.

"Are you feeling all right, Froggy?" Alex asked him.

"I'll be just fine," he said. "I'm a tad dizzy, that's all. I think the week is catching up to me."

He walked a little ways away from them, clutching the balcony tightly as he went, but Alex didn't press the matter. She tried to think of something to talk about that would take Red's mind off her troubles.

"At least while you're here I can introduce you to Rook," Alex told her.

Red nodded but then quickly looked confused. "Sorry—who?" she asked.

Alex sighed. Red had been through such a wringer she couldn't fault her for not remembering his name.

Emerelda suddenly rushed onto the balcony and went straight to Alex.

"Alex, you need to come with me," she said in a serious tone.

"Why, what's wrong?" she asked.

"It's your grandmother," Emerelda said. "She's sick."

Alex didn't know what to say to this. As far as she knew, her grandmother had never been sick in her entire life. Could Fairy Godmothers even get sick?

A croaking sound unexpectedly came from the end of the balcony and interrupted her train of thought.

"Would this by chance have anything to do with my current situation?" Froggy asked.

They all turned to look at him by the railing and Red screamed. Without warning or reason, Froggy had transformed back into a frog.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE ARMÉE ARRIVES

Conner was spinning through a world of light. It was so bright he could barely see anything. He couldn't hear the sound of his own voice, either—all he heard was the air rushing around him. Occasionally he saw Bree or Emmerich fly past him. He reached for them but couldn't reach far enough to catch them. He knew they were in the space between dimensions; he had been here before when he and his sister traveled through the *Land of Stories* book two years ago. Only it seemed to be taking much longer to arrive than it had the last time.

Conner saw a flash and felt something brush by him as if he were falling through a curtain. The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back looking up at a hazy night sky. He stayed there for a moment and didn't move, waiting for his senses to catch up with him.

There were two more flashes nearby and he felt *thud*s on the ground—Bree and Emmerich had landed beside him. Conner sat up to check on his friends and saw that they were as discombobulated as he was.

"Well, now we know the portal is definitely open," Conner said.

Bree pulled herself up to a seated position. "Is it always this rough getting here?" she said.

"No," he said. "I don't know why that was so tough."

Emmerich was so dizzy he could barely speak. "I don't think we're in Hohenschwangau anymore," he said, and his head bobbed up and down.

Conner got to his feet and looked at the forest around them. The trees were tall and their branches stretched wide into the sky. But they were bare of leaves and almost looked dead. It was foggy so he couldn't see very far into the distance.

Bree got to her feet, too. "So this is it, huh?" she asked.

"A part of it," Conner said. "Although I'm not sure where."

Emmerich tried getting to his feet but kept falling. Conner and Bree dragged him to the closest tree and propped him up against the trunk.

“Will one of you please tell me where I am?” Emmerich asked. “And what happened in Neuschwanstein?”

“I told you it would be cooler than being secret agents,” Bree said playfully.

“We’re in the fairy-tale world, bud,” Conner explained. “We accessed a portal that was hidden inside Neuschwanstein.”

Emmerich looked around the forest with large amazed eyes. *“The fairy-tale world?”* he said. “As in Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel—”

“They’re all here,” Conner said. “My grandma and sister live here, too. The portal between this world and ours had been blocked for a while but a friend of mine asked me to check if it had been re-opened—and here we are.”

Emmerich had so many questions he didn’t know what to ask first. “Why did your friend ask you to check it?” was the question he chose.

“To make sure some bad people couldn’t get in,” Conner said.

Bree turned her head and looked at the forest around them. “Speaking of, if *we* got through the portal into the fairy-tale world, doesn’t that mean the French—”

Bright lights abruptly flashed all around them. With each flash, something extremely heavy appeared in midair and crashed to the ground. Bree screamed when she realized most of the objects were *human.* Conner was afraid something or someone would fall on them and looked for someplace to take cover.

“Hurry! Climb the tree!” he yelled. They helped Emmerich to his feet and the three of them dashed up the tree, climbing as high as they could. From the treetop they got a better view of what was happening. It was as if a lightning storm had swept over the forest and was raining cannons, carriages, horses, swords, long pointed guns, *and soldiers.*

“It’s the army!” Conner whispered to his friends. *“They’re here!”*

The storm of soldiers didn’t show any sign of letting up. From the top of the tree the three kids saw flashes in the fog for miles around. The hundreds of men and pieces of equipment that rained from the sky turned into thousands as the storm increased. Many soldiers barely missed being crushed by the carriages or cannons or horses that fell beside them.

Eventually the storm dissipated and the thunderous crashes around the forest came to a stop. The sounds of thousands of men moaning and

grunting took its place. The soldiers twitched and turned on the ground—they were a hundred times as discombobulated as Conner, Bree, and Emmerich had been. Most of them held their heads in agony or vomited.

They all wore black boots, white pants, and blue jackets. Most of them wore plain hats while others' were decorated with colorful accessories and feathers representing their rank. They stayed on the ground for a long while without attempting to stand.

One man appeared through the fog in the distance. He was smaller than the average man and wore a large curved hat. He gazed around at the suffering soldiers with disgust. A musky cologne smell filled the air as he got closer to the tree where Conner, Bree, and Emmerich were hidden. Although Conner and Bree had never seen him before, they were certain he had to be General Jacques Marquis, who Mother Goose had warned them about.

The general apparently had a much stronger stomach than the soldiers and wasn't affected by the arrival. *"Debout!"* he shouted at the anguished men on the ground. *"Vous êtes une honte pour la France!"*

"What did he say?" Conner whispered to the others.

"He said, 'Stand up, you're an embarrassment to France,' " Emmerich translated.

"You speak French?" Conner asked.

"I can speak German, English, French, and Danish."

Conner was floored. *"Wow, I'm still struggling with English."*

Bree covered their mouths with her hands. *"This is not the time to be comparing party tricks!"* she snapped, and they both stayed quiet.

Many of the soldiers stumbled to their feet as their general commanded. Emmerich quietly translated what they were saying for Conner and Bree.

"Walk it off like men," the general told his nauseated soldiers. "This is nothing compared to the battle ahead."

Another man appeared through the fog. He was a very tall and broad man and wore a rounded hat just like the general's but it was turned to the side.

"General Marquis—congratulations, sir, we've arrived," Colonel Baton said.

"Yes, Colonel, I can see that," the general barked. "But there is no use congratulating me until we know *exactly* where we are."

Two other soldiers hurried through the forest to the general and colonel. They were dragging another man who didn't look like a soldier at all.

"General Marquis! Colonel Baton!" Captain De Lange said. "We've found someone!"

"This man was walking through the forest when we arrived!" Lieutenant Rembert said.

They pushed the weak old man onto the ground in front of General Marquis. He was terrified and looked around at the soldiers in complete shock. "I saw you all fall from the sky!" he said, trembling. "What kind of magic is this?"

The general had no time for his befuddlement. "Tell us where we are and you may keep your life," he said.

"Why… why… you're in the Eastern Kingdom, sir," the old man said.

Conner locked eyes with Bree; this was good information for them to know, too.

"And what is near here other than trees?" the general asked.

"The border of the Fairy Kingdom is west of here, but Pinocchio Prison is closer, just to the east," the old man said.

The general stepped closer to him, looking intrigued. "A prison, you say?" he said. "Home to what kind of criminals?"

"The worst criminals in all the kingdoms," the old man said, surprised the general did not know.

General Marquis's forehead went very smooth and the corners of his mouth curled to form a sinister smile. "Gentlemen," he said to his soldiers. "The gods have smiled down on us! Soon we shall have the fairy-tale world in the palm of our hands! Napoleon will be so proud!"

The soldiers mustered up enough energy to cheer.

"You're here to take over the world?" the old man asked. "Who are you people?"

The general bent low to look the man in the eyes. "Unfortunately, you already know too much," he said. "Get rid of him."

The old man screamed. *"No! Please! I have a family!"* he pleaded, but it was no use. The general didn't have an ounce of mercy to spare. Captain De Lange and Lieutenant Rembert dragged the old man into the foggy woods and his screams echoed through the trees around them. A moment later a gunshot was heard and the woods were silent again.

Bree had to cover her mouth to keep from screaming. Emmerich gazed around the woods like he had found himself in a nightmare. Conner looked at them with a grave expression in his eyes—they had to stay as quiet as possible or they could be next.

“Colonel Baton, we need to regroup with our men immediately,” the general instructed. “Half will stay in the woods and set up camp, the other half will accompany us to the prison. We strike at dawn.”

“What are we doing at the prison, sir?” Baton asked.

“Recruiting,” the general said.

They walked back through the trees in the direction they had come from and disappeared into the fog. The other soldiers gathered their weapons that were scattered around the trees, hitched the horses to the wagons, and followed them into the woods. Conner, Bree, and Emmerich were the only ones left in the area.

Conner gestured to the others to stay quiet as he climbed down the tree. Once he made sure the coast was clear, he signaled for them to join him.

“That poor old man,” Emmerich said with his eyes full of tears. “I can’t believe the general would do that to him! I always thought if someone needed help I could save them like a superhero in the movies, but I guess I was wrong.”

Bree placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Conner’s mind was racing as he thought about something the general had said. “Did you hear what he told the soldiers?” Conner asked the others. “He said, ‘Napoleon will be so proud.’ ”

The same thought had occurred to Bree. “Yeah,” she said. “Napoleon’s been dead for, like, two hundred years. I don’t think they realize how long they were in the portal.”

“Then how do we know how long *we* were in the portal?” Emmerich asked.

Conner and Bree looked at each other and chills went down their spines. Could they have been stuck in the portal for longer than they realized, too? It was all the more reason to find someone they knew as quickly as possible.

Conner felt so guilty for exposing Bree and Emmerich to this; it almost brought him to tears. He knew he should get them out of the Land of Stories as soon as he could.

“I’m not going to lie; these guys are really scary,” he said. “And right now we need to get to the Fairy Palace pronto so I can warn my friends that the army is here. Once we’re at the palace, I promise I’ll find a way to send you back to the Otherworld.”

Bree and Emmerich both nodded.

“Now follow me,” Conner said. “We have to travel west into the Fairy Kingdom—and we have to move fast.”

Chapter Fifteen

A BITTERSWEET REUNION

Alex sat by her grandma's bedside holding her hand. The Fairy Godmother had been sleeping peacefully since she got there. She didn't look like she had a care in the world, but Alex knew this was her favorite façade to keep; even as she slept she couldn't be trusted to show her true feelings. Something was very wrong and Alex could sense it.

"Are you going to tell me what's the matter with her?" Alex asked. "Or are you just going to sit there and make me figure it out on my own like everything else?"

Emerelda and Mother Goose sat on the other side of the bed keeping to themselves. Red and Froggy were there, too; they stood at the foot of the bed wishing there was something they could do to comfort their friend. The week had proven to be a difficult one for all of them.

"Your grandmother has been feeling very *tired* for a long time," Mother Goose said. "She asked me not to tell anyone—and then today she didn't wake up."

"Today is the first time I'm hearing about this, too, Alex," Emerelda said. "She was keeping it from everyone."

"But what does *tired* mean?" Alex said, becoming frustrated. "Does she just need to rest? Is there anything I can get or give her to wake her up? Or is she… is she…"

Alex couldn't bring herself to say it.

"I'm afraid there's nothing any of us can do," Mother Goose said.

"So she's *dying*," Alex finally said. "If that's what's happening why can't either of you just tell me?"

Emerelda sighed, not for Alex, but for herself. "Yes," she confirmed. "We believe the Fairy Godmother is dying."

Tears immediately ran down Alex's face. She had always known her grandmother wouldn't be around forever, but she'd never expected to lose her so soon.

“I am so sorry, Alex,” Red said.

“Please let us know if there is anything we can do,” Froggy said.

Alex didn’t say anything. Of course there wasn’t. The only thing that would comfort her now would be if her grandmother woke up.

“I haven’t even lived here a full year yet,” Alex said through her tears. “My grandma is the only family I have. I just don’t understand why this is happening.…”

Mother Goose hoped it would supply the young fairy with a little comfort if she explained.

“Your grandmother has been around for a very long time, Alex,” Mother Goose told her. “She’s worked very hard to make the fairy-tale world what it is. She knew she wouldn’t be around forever and over the past couple of centuries she’s looked for someone to continue her work when she’s gone. She’s had many apprentices and all of them have failed but you. In you, she finally found someone she knows will continue her legacy and continue it well. And knowing this, she’s given her soul permission to *move on*.”

This only made it much worse for Alex. “So what you’re saying is, it’s *my fault*,” she said. “Had I never come to live in the Land of Stories or joined the Fairy Council, she would still be looking for a successor and wouldn’t be in this bed. *I’m killing her*.”

“Good heavens, no,” Mother Goose said. “I’m trying to tell you you’re *saving her*. You’re giving your grandmother the freedom to pass on, and that’s a right every living creature deserves when it’s their time to go.”

It was a very hard thing for Alex to hear. Had she known that with every lesson or test she passed she was getting closer to losing her grandmother, Alex would have given it all up in a heartbeat. But she also knew that was the last thing her grandmother would have wanted.

“How much time do we have left with her?” Alex asked. “Will she wake up before she goes?”

“It’s hard to say,” Emerelda said. “There’s always a chance. She could very well pull through this and live for another hundred years—it all depends on how much magic she has left in her. But given the information she shared with Mother Goose, we think it’s very unlikely.”

“And that’s why Froggy turned into a frog again,” Alex said, starting to make sense of it all. “As she dies some of her magic starts to die with her, so her most recent spells and enchantments will slowly start to fade and

wear off.”

“Correct,” Emerelda said. “And it’s our job to make sure the work she put into this world never fades away completely.”

Alex gently touched the side of her grandmother’s face. She was such an extraordinary woman; she wouldn’t be surprised if there was still a bit of magic in her somewhere.

“Froggy, I’d be more than happy to change you back into a man,” Alex said. “It may take me a couple tries but I think I can do it.”

Froggy was touched by the gesture, especially given the situation, but he surprised the whole room with his answer. “No, that’s all right,” he said. “Red, my darling, I hope you can understand this but I’ve thought it over and decided to stay a frog.”

They all were shocked to hear this, especially Red.

“What are you saying?” Red asked. “What would make you come to that conclusion?”

“Because no matter how many times I become a man I always change back into a frog,” he explained. “I think the universe is trying to tell me something. And although I put on a good show, each transformation is more exhausting than the last. Constantly having to re-train yourself to walk and to eat and to function takes a heavy toll. I’d much rather just choose one form and stick with it, and it appears being a frog is what’s meant to be.”

Red tried her absolute best to take this news well, but after so recently losing her throne she couldn’t put on a brave face.

“Forgive me,” Red said, blinking back tears. “I don’t mean to look as disappointed as I do. Charlie, you stood by me even as I lost my kingdom—I know I can support you through something as trivial as this—it’s just going to take some getting used to, I suppose. Please excuse me; I’m going to get some fresh air.”

Red left the Fairy Godmother’s chambers intact but once she was out the door they heard her burst into tears. Alex gently placed her grandmother’s hand on the bed and rose to leave.

“I need some air, too,” Alex said.

“I’ll walk out with you,” Mother Goose said.

“I’ll stay with the Fairy Godmother,” Emerelda said.

“Me too,” Froggy said, and took Alex’s seat.

As Alex walked with Mother Goose through the halls of the Fairy

Palace she could tell the news about her grandmother had spread. Every fairy who passed looked at her somberly, expressing sympathy and respect as she walked by.

“This is going to be so hard to get through without my brother,” Alex said. “I would give anything to have him here with me.”

Mother Goose’s eyes darted up and down the hall. When they reached a vacant part of the hall, she quickly pulled Alex behind a pillar and out of sight.

“Alex, I need to tell you something,” Mother Goose said. “It’s about your brother.”

“What is it?” Alex asked.

“When your grandmother first told me how she was feeling, I immediately contacted Conner,” she explained. “I didn’t tell him she was sick, but I sent him on a little errand for me—to check on something.”

“To check on what?” Alex asked.

“Froggy’s spell isn’t the only bit of your grandmother’s magic that might wear off,” she said. “The spell she cast to shut the portal between the worlds may fade away as well. And I asked Conner to check it out.”

A roller coaster of emotions ran through Alex’s body. Was it possible a bit of good news could come with this tragedy? After all, if the portal could be opened, she might see her brother again.

“How long until we know?” she asked.

“I’m still waiting to hear from him,” Mother Goose said. “Your grandmother’s magic may be fading, but as long as there’s the smallest bit left in her, there’s no way of telling which of her spells will stick. It could take weeks, months, or even years before we know about the portal.”

Red suddenly stormed down the hallway but stopped when she saw Alex and Mother Goose talking behind the pillar.

“Red, what’s wrong?” Mother Goose asked her. “Are you just sad about Charlie being pro-frog or has Clawdius swallowed one of the pixies again?”

“I was on the balcony feeling sorry for myself when I spotted something,” Red said with bright eyes. “I may be hallucinating from all the misfortune, but I could swear I just saw *Conner* running toward the palace!”

Mother Goose jerked her head back to Alex. “Or perhaps the portal’s open and we’ll know in a matter of minutes,” she said, finishing her previous thought. *“Let’s get to the balcony!”*

The three of them ran down the hall and emerged onto the grand balcony of the Fairy Palace. They scanned the gardens below until they saw a familiar young man running toward them.

"Conner!" Alex screamed down at him. Seeing her brother running through the gardens put her in a state of complete shock, as if she were seeing a ghost. Was she really seeing him or had the misfortune of the day caused her to hallucinate, too?

"Alex!" Conner yelled up at her. He was wheezing and sweaty, like he had been running for hours. *"I have to tell you something—"* His voice faded away, his eyes rolled into the back of his head, and Conner fainted on the spot.

Without missing a beat, Alex ran off the balcony, through the palace, and into the gardens to her brother's side. She kneeled on the ground next to him and placed his head in her lap. Mother Goose and Red arrived right after her.

"Is he dead?" Red asked, hiding behind Mother Goose.

"Conner, can you hear me?" Alex said to her unconscious brother. *"Can you hear me?"*

Mother Goose removed her flask from her hat and splashed his face with the liquid inside. Conner stirred to life and quickly sat up.

"Ahh! That burns!" he said, wiping the liquid out of his eyes. *"What's wrong with you?"*

"Sorry, but that usually does the trick," Mother Goose said.

Alex instantly broke into tears upon seeing that he was all right. She had spent months convinced she would never see him in person again—and now here he was, sitting on the ground in front of her. She wrapped her arms around his ribs and cried into his chest.

"Conner! You're here! You're actually here!" she sobbed. *"I've never been so happy to see someone in my entire life!"*

He was panting but still found the strength to hug her back. "It's good to see you, too, Alex," he huffed.

Mother Goose interrupted their reunion. "Kid, if you're here I'm assuming that means—"

"The portal's open!" Conner said breathlessly. *"And the army—they're here, too!"*

Mother Goose suddenly went pale as a ghost. She tipped her head back

and drank whatever was left in her flask. Alex didn't understand what they were talking about.

"Conner, what army?" she asked. "And what have you been running from?"

"It's a long story," Conner said. "But first, I have two friends with me from the Otherworld who helped me find the portal. They're in the woods somewhere behind me; they couldn't run anymore so I left them behind—we have to find them and send them home as soon as possible."

"I'm on it," Mother Goose said, and whistled for Lester. A couple moments later the giant goose swooped down from the towers of the palace and landed on the ground next to them. Lester was just as surprised to see Conner as the rest of them.

"Squaaaw?" Lester squawked.

"Hi, buddy, long time no see," Conner said, and rubbed Lester's long neck.

Mother Goose hopped aboard the gander and they took off into the night sky to find Conner's friends. Conner got to his feet; he was still having a hard time catching his breath.

Froggy appeared at the top of the palace's front steps and looked across the gardens. He was amazed by what he saw. "Conner?" he gasped. "Is that really you?"

"Yes, Conner's back!" Red called to him. "The *porthole* has been re-opened or something."

Froggy leaped across the gardens and gave his friend a giant hug. He didn't care how Conner had managed to return; he was just happy something good could come out of this day.

"Hi, Froggy," Conner said. "It's so good to see you all again!"

"You look flustered, old chap," Froggy said. "What's the matter?"

"Please tell us what's wrong," Alex pleaded. "You're starting to scare me."

Conner took a few extra-deep breaths to calm his racing heart and then told them what was happening. He started with his trip to Germany and the warning the Brothers Grimm had left in their last story. He explained how he had tried to get ahold of Alex but eventually contacted Mother Goose. He filled them in on how the Brothers Grimm had tricked the Grande Armée into an enchanted portal. Conner told them about his trip across

Europe to find the portal and to see if it was open—with Bree and Emmerich's help. And then, to their absolute horror, he told them that the army of thousands of men had finally arrived in the Land of Stories after two hundred years.

They were all at a loss for words. None of them wanted to believe their horrible week was gravely worse than they'd thought.

"Oh my gosh," Alex said. "This is unbelievable."

"Tell me about it," Conner said. "It's been a rough couple days."

Hearing this confused Alex. "A couple days?" she clarified. "Wait, you say you tried contacting me during the ball?"

"Yeah," Conner said, and rolled his eyes remembering his attempts. "It must have been a pretty busy ball since you couldn't speak to me for three days."

"I'm sorry about that, I was occupied with a lot of things," Alex said, not wanting to get into them. "But the ball was almost a month ago. Conner, you've been in that portal for *weeks*!"

Just when Conner's heart had calmed down it started racing again. Emmerich's suspicion was right—the soldiers weren't the only ones who had lost all track of time while they were in the portal. No wonder they had been so discombobulated when they arrived.

"Oh no," Conner said. "That means Bree and Emmerich have been away from their families for a month."

"Once Mother Goose brings them back, we'll take them to my chambers and send them home using our old *Land of Stories* book," Alex decided. "It should be working again since the portal has been re-opened."

A question suddenly came to Conner's mind. "But Mother Goose never explained to me *why* the portal has been re-opened," he said. "Do any of you know why this is happening now?"

Alex looked gloomily to Froggy and Red and they went silent. Conner could tell they knew something he didn't—something important.

"What is it?" Conner said. "Has something else happened that I don't know about?"

Alex took a deep breath before breaking the news to him. "Conner, the portal is open for the same reason Froggy is a frog again," she said. "Grandma's magic is fading because… Grandma's dying."

Conner felt like he had been punched in the stomach. He fell to his

knees and his eyes darted around the gardens surrounding him. This couldn't be happening. He had risked so much in the Otherworld trying to save his loved ones only to find out he *couldn't* save his grandmother after all. It was like he was trapped in a nightmare that he couldn't wake up from.

"Grandma can't die," Conner said, and tears formed in his eyes. "She's a Fairy Godmother… fairies don't die.…"

Telling him was almost harder than hearing it herself. "Apparently they do," Alex said through her own tears.

"How long does she have?" he whimpered.

"There's no way of knowing," Alex said. "Emerelda said as long as there's still magic left inside her there's always a chance she could pull through, but it looks unlikely since all her spells are fading."

A sudden gust of air blew by them as Mother Goose and Lester returned. They had found Bree and Emmerich and safely brought them to the Fairy Kingdom. The two were beside themselves as they looked around at the majestic gardens and stunning palace—they had never seen such a beautiful place.

"Wow, you don't see this every day," Emmerich said.

"Now *this* is what I was expecting!" Bree said happily.

Mother Goose hopped down from Lester and helped them off the large bird. They joined the others around Conner.

"That's a big frog," Emmerich said when he saw Froggy standing there. He stepped behind Bree and hid from him.

"Hi, Alex!" Bree said sheepishly; she almost hadn't recognized her. "I don't know if you remember me but we were in Social Studies together in the seventh grade. You look great, nice palace!"

"Hi, Bree," Alex said, vaguely remembering her. "Thanks for helping my brother find the portal."

"No worries," Bree said. "My schedule was pretty open."

Conner tearfully looked up at Mother Goose. "You didn't tell me the portal was opening because Grandma was sick," he said.

Mother Goose let out a long sigh. "I'm sorry, C-Dog, I didn't think I should be the one to tell you," she said.

Conner looked away from her. "No, you never want to take responsibility for anything," he said coldly.

Mother Goose went quiet and shamefully looked to the ground; he was

right. Bree and Emmerich fell silent, too; they weren't sure what kind of drama they had walked into.

"Would it make you feel better if you saw her?" Alex asked her brother. "She's resting in her room."

Conner shook his head; he wanted to take care of his guilt before he moved on to his grief. "No, I want to get Bree and Emmerich home first," he said. "I don't want to expose them to more than I already have."

Alex led them into the palace and up the stairs to her chambers. She retrieved their old *Land of Stories* book with its emerald cover and gold writing from its special spot on her bookshelf. She placed the large book in the center of her bed. She tapped it three times with the tip of her crystal wand but nothing happened. She tried it twice more but got the same result.

"I don't understand," she said. "If the portal is open, why isn't the book working?"

Mother Goose picked up the book and inspected every inch of it. Her eyes lit up as she came to a sudden realization. "Because the portal is still *halfway closed*," she explained. "Your grandmother's magic has faded enough for the portal to open on the Otherworld side, but not enough for it to open on this side. It's like a doorway that's only been unlocked on one side."

"So you're saying Bree and Emmerich are stuck here?" Conner asked. The situation just grew more terrible by the hour.

"For the time being," Mother Goose said.

"Wait a second," Alex said, and looked up to all the guests in her room. Her eyes widened and a smile slowly appeared. "This is good news."

"How could this be good news?" Conner asked.

"Because if the portal is closed on our side, it means there's still a little bit of magic left in Grandma," she said happily.

Chapter Sixteen

THE MASKED MAN OF PINOCCHIO PRISON

Pinocchio Prison had just been restored following the Enchantress's vicious attack when it was faced with yet another threat. Like a swift bolt of lightning, the Grande Armée charged toward the fortress in the early hours of the morning and unleashed the full power of its nineteenth-century artilleries.

The heavy, spiked front doors of the prison were blasted into smithereens by the army's cannons. Only two hundred enchanted wooden soldiers guarded the prisoners inside and they were no match for the thousands of Frenchmen invading the prison. The Grande Armée forced its way inside and the wooden soldiers were blown into pieces by volleys of rifle fire.

After the wooden soldiers were completely obliterated and the smoke began to clear, General Marquis stepped inside the prison and had a look at his newest conquest. Pinocchio Prison was thirty stories high and open on the inside like a cylinder; from the center of the ground floor the general could see floor after floor of various creatures locked in their cells above him.

The prisoners were a rowdy bunch, consisting of ogres, witches, trolls, goblins, elves, animals, men, and women alike. Some welcomed the French soldiers who had destroyed the wooden guards by banging their chains against the bars of their cells. Others cowered in fear, afraid they would be targeted next.

Nothing was known about these intruders. They spoke and dressed differently from anyone the prisoners had ever seen. Judging by their weapons, the prisoners could only assume these men were soldiers of very dark magic.

The remains of the wooden soldiers were piled in the center of the prison. Many pieces, such as the legs and hands, still twitched. The general poured lamp oil over the pile of the fallen and lit it on fire so the prisoners

above could watch the guards who had held them captive burn.

General Marquis circled the flames and a hush fell over the prison.

“Good morning,” the general said to the prisoners above. “I am General Marquis of the Grande Armée of the French Empire. I am certain many of you have never heard of the empire and its army before, so I would like to change that now. Where we come from, we are known as one of the greatest military forces in history. We have dominated every territory in our path and have defeated every nation that stood in our way. And now we have come to your world to claim it as our own.”

The prisoners grew uncomfortable in his presence. The general didn’t need to say anything further to convince them that he was a cunning and powerful man; they could sense it.

“Where we come from, we have a phrase,” the general continued. “*The enemy of my enemy is my friend,* we say. Today I would like to give each of you a chance to *make friends* with the Grande Armée. We offer you a chance to join our conquest and be cleared of your crimes. Help us fight against the people who imprisoned you—help us seize this world in the name of France and become part of *the French Empire*!”

The majority of the prisoners cheered at what he was offering.

“Or you can stay here and rot as intended,” the general said. “The choice is yours.”

The prison vibrated as the prisoners roared with delight. Anything was better than spending another day in the prison—even joining an army. Finally they could experience the freedom and revenge they had only dreamed about.

Colonel Baton, along with Capitaine De Lange and Lieutenant Rembert, recruited the criminals one cell at a time. The inmates were given the options of pledging their allegiance to the French Empire or remaining locked in their cell. And to the general’s pleasure, almost all the prisoners waited with bated breath to pledge their allegiance and be freed from their cells.

Only one prisoner gave the commanders an answer they weren’t expecting. His cell was at the very top of the prison and he supplied them with a message for the general that was too enticing to ignore.

“General Marquis,” Colonel Baton said. “There is a prisoner who wishes to speak with you, sir.”

The general was irritated Baton would even bring him such a request. “And what makes this man worthy of my time?”

“He wishes to help you,” Baton said. “And he says without his help, you cannot conquer the fairy-tale world.”

Hearing the prisoner’s message infuriated the general. Who would dare be so bold as to give General Jacques Marquis an ultimatum? But the general was so determined in his quest for domination, he allowed his curiosity to outweigh his ego. He decided to speak with the prisoner and see if he had anything worthwhile to contribute.

Baton led the general to the very top of the prison and showed him to the cell of the daring man. A large plaque displayed on the wall beside his cell read:

THE MASKED MAN
SENTENCED TO LIFE IN
PINOCCHIO PRISON
FOR ATTEMPTED ROBBERY OF THE
FAIRY GODMOTHER

The general peered into the cell to see the prisoner for himself. The Masked Man was tall but very frail. He wore a tattered suit and his tie was torn in half. A gray sack over his head concealed his face; holes were cut around the eyes and mouth.

“You are the Masked Man, I take it,” the general said.

“Hello, General,” he said. “I thoroughly enjoyed your speech down there. Boy, you sure know how to make an entrance. Did they teach you that in your military training?”

The general glared at this ridiculous man. “I do not have time for games,” he said. “Make sure this man stays in his cell.”

The general stormed off but the Masked Man desperately reached for him through his bars and begged him to stay.

“No, wait, General!” he pleaded. “I apologize! I didn’t mean to offend you—I’m only trying to help you! I have information that will lead you to a certain victory!”

On this the general turned on his heel and faced the prisoner. “And how can a man like *you* possibly help a man like *me*?”

“Because you’re not from this world, and I am!” the Masked Man said. “I know my way around it and how it operates. You have a very impressive army, but that won’t be enough to take over. You’re going to need something bigger, something much more powerful if you’re going to stand up to the fairies. And I know where you can get it!”

The general took a step closer to the man, his interest sparked although his face didn’t show it. “You have two minutes of my time,” he said. “Explain yourself.”

The Masked Man rubbed his hands together and began. He was a very odd and animated man and used lots of hand gestures as he spoke, most of which didn’t go along with what he said. It was like his hands and mouth were describing two different things.

“The first thing you should know about this world is its history,” he said. “The past is divided into three ages: the Dragon Age, the Age of Magic, and the Golden Age, which we’re living in now. Hundreds of years ago, during the Dragon Age, this world was a mess! It was filled with tyrant kings and evil sorcerers and obviously *dragons*, lots and lots of dragons—they were nearly unstoppable and reproduced like rabbits!”

“What value does this history lesson have to me?” the general asked. He was starting to feel like his time was being wasted and it angered him.

“I’m getting there, General,” the Masked Man assured him. “Like I was saying, there were dragons everywhere destroying everything—then the fairies got together and put a stop to them. That’s how they came to power and the world entered the Age of Magic. They formed the Happily Ever After Assembly and there was peace on earth and *yadda, yadda, yadda.*… Now the Fairy Godmother, the head of the assembly, and her fairies have been in charge since the dragons went extinct and no one has been able to overthrow them *because*…”

He was hoping the general would play along and finish his sentence but Marquis didn’t break his stoic expression.

“Dragons!” the Masked Man said with mystical hand gestures. “No one has been able to overthrow the fairies because you need a dragon—and I know where to get one!”

General Marquis had expected his left eye to start twitching from the

moment the Masked Man started speaking—but it didn't. There must have been some truth to what he was saying.

"So where do we get this dragon?" the general asked.

The Masked Man dropped his hands and an equally serious expression grew on his own face. "Let me out of this cell first, and then I'll *show* you."

General Marquis was impressed by the Masked Man's quick and calculated scheme. But he figured there was much more to this man than met the eye. He wanted to know more about him before he unlocked the door of his cell.

"How long have you been in this prison?" he asked.

"A decade," the Masked Man said.

"And why were you sentenced to life for *attempted burglary*?" the general pressed. "Surely even in this world that's an awfully harsh punishment for such a little crime."

The Masked Man lowered his head shamefully, not for committing the crime, but for failing to accomplish it. "It was *what* I was trying to steal that cemented the sentence," he said, and then looked into the general's eyes. "You and I are very similar men, General. We know an opportunity when we see one; otherwise neither of us would be standing here now."

There was eagerness in the Masked Man's pale blue eyes that the general found alluring. Perhaps this man could be of service after all.

"One last question," the general said. "Why do you wear that bag over your head?"

The Masked Man smiled coyly. "The same reason you wear that uniform," he said. "To cover something I don't want the rest of the world to see."

Normally a statement like this would outrage the general, but this time it made him smile. The Masked Man was a strange man, but he was one of the few the general could identify with.

"Colonel Baton," General Marquis ordered. "Remove this man from his cell. As soon as we leave the prison we will organize a traveling party and he will guide us to a dragon."

Chapter Seventeen

THE ONLY WITNESS

Alex and Conner sat by their grandma's bedside all night. Neither of them could think about sleep at a time like this. They were afraid if they left their grandmother it would discourage her from waking up. They hoped that if she felt their presence for long enough, it might activate that last bit of magic inside of her.

An emergency Fairy Council meeting was called early the next morning to discuss the matters at stake. Since the Fairy Godmother was absent, Alex asked Conner to accompany her. The twins always thought best when they were together and they hoped they could help the Fairy Council assess the current situation. Alex took a seat in her chair and Conner leaned against its arm. Although their grandmother's seat was empty Conner wouldn't sit in it; he didn't want to feel like it was *available.*

The meeting had already started and they could tell the conversation was heated when they walked in. All the fairies were standing at their respective podiums staring daggers at Mother Goose.

"Let me get this straight," Emerelda said. "An army from the Otherworld has been trapped in a portal for two hundred years and now they've arrived and plan on taking over our world?"

"That's it in a golden eggshell," Mother Goose said. She shifted in her seat as the others glared at her.

"And why didn't you bring this to anyone's attention?" Tangerina said, absolutely infuriated. Her bees flew aggressively around her beehive. They would have attacked Mother Goose had she given them the word.

"I didn't want to worry the Fairy Godmother," Mother Goose said. "I thought I could take care of the situation myself and was too embarrassed to involve anyone else. The Brothers Grimm and I trapped them inside the portal and then, luckily, by the time their two hundred years were up, the portal had been permanently closed by the Fairy Godmother. I thought I was in the clear for good until she became ill."

“So you didn’t tell anyone about this because you didn’t want anyone to *worry* or *think less of you*?” Skylene asked. “That seems like jumping into a lake to avoid the rain if you ask me.”

Mother Goose looked at the twins, especially at Conner, and then told the council something she had never told anyone before. “A very long time ago, before any of you were on this council, before the Fairy Godmother and I lost the color in our hair, gained the wrinkles on our faces, and when we were both much thinner—before Ezmia and Alex—*I* was the Fairy Godmother’s first apprentice,” she confessed.

All the fairies looked at one another, floored. Of all the things they involuntarily knew about her, Alex and Conner were impressed she had managed to keep *this* a secret.

“It only took me a few months to realize I wasn’t cut out for the job,” Mother Goose explained. “Sure, I was *capable*, but I just wasn’t *willing*. I was too much of a free spirit to take on that kind of responsibility. So I passed on the highest honor a fairy could have and became the laughingstock of the kingdom. The Fairy Godmother said she understood but I knew she was disappointed and it killed me. I promised myself I would never let her down again, so in the 1800s when I was careless enough to get caught by those greedy French fries, I tried to handle the situation the best way I could so I would never have to see disappointment in those eyes again.”

None of the fairies knew what to say so they just shook their heads. Conner felt sorry for Mother Goose. After growing up with a sister as precocious as Alex, he knew very well what it was like to constantly disappoint people. Now he understood why Mother Goose hadn’t been honest with him about the portal.

“Oh come on,” Conner said to the fairies. “Give Mother Goose a break! You’re all standing there shaking your heads as if you could have handled the situation better. Well, no offense, but at least she came up with a solution. I can’t remember the last time I saw any of *you* solve anything. Every time there’s a crisis it’s usually Alex and me who figure out what to do.”

“How are we *not* supposed to take offense at that?” Xanthous asked the others.

“My point is, glass people shouldn’t throw stones,” Conner said.

“The phrase is ‘People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,’ ” Alex corrected him.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Well, you get my point.”

Mother Goose smiled at Conner and mouthed, *“Thank you, C-Dog.”* Emerelda massaged her forehead as she thought about what to do next.

“There’s no use in blaming anyone for what has happened—we need to move forward to find a way to fix it,” Emerelda said. “Alex, what do you think we should do?”

She couldn’t believe Emerelda was asking her. “Me?” she asked.

“Yes, of course you,” Emerelda said. “Unless your grandmother miraculously recovers, you’ll be acting as Fairy Godmother.”

This was a heavy thing for both the twins to digest. When people referred to Alex as the next Fairy Godmother, she always assumed they meant someday in the distant future, not now.

Alex bit her thumb and looked at the floor while she thought it over. “We need to see this army first, so we know for sure what we’re up against,” she said. “The more we know about them, the easier it will be to find a solution.”

“The last thing I heard them talk about was an attack on Pinocchio Prison,” Conner said.

“Why would they be attacking a prison?” Rosette asked.

“The general said they were *recruiting*,” Conner said.

Suddenly the room grew very tense. All the fairies eyed one another and frantically whispered among themselves.

“I told you, that General Marquis is a smart man,” Mother Goose said.

“Wait, am I missing something?” Conner asked. “What use can he get from recruiting a bunch of criminals?”

“There are some pretty powerful characters in that prison,” Mother Goose said. “Trust me, I know most of them. And the prisoners in Pinocchio Prison are only the ones who have been *caught.* The Dwarf Forests and the backwoods of every kingdom are crawling with criminals, and when they see their friends have joined an army fighting against us, they’ll all want to join, too. If the general succeeds in recruiting them, we won’t just be fighting an old army, we could be fighting a *war*.”

Conner gulped. He was sorry he had even asked. Coral was having difficulty processing the information, too. She politely raised a hand and

asked a question.

“So are you saying that it’s possible the Happily Ever After Assembly may be up against—?”

“*Everyone else?*” Mother Goose said. “All the creatures in the other kingdoms have been waiting for an opportunity to overthrow the fairies and the humans. This could be their chance.”

Coral looked like she was about to cry. She cradled Fisher even tighter in her arms at the thought of what tomorrow might bring.

“The witches, the ogres, the trolls, the goblins, the elves—they’ve wanted us gone since the Dragon Age!” Violetta added. “They’ve just lacked the organizational skills to challenge us.”

“And those are skills the general can provide,” Mother Goose said.

While Conner and the fairies started to panic, Alex was adamant about her original plan. The more information they had, the more options they would have. She raised her wand and a bright bolt of light shot out of it, silencing the room of frightened fairies.

“We’re worrying about a lot of *ifs*,” Alex said. “We don’t know *if* the prisoners have joined the general yet. Those criminals are in prison because they couldn’t follow the rules of a society; what makes us think they’ll follow the general’s commands?”

She made a very good point—there was no use in worrying unless they had evidence to worry about.

“My brother and I will go to the prison and see if they were successful in recruiting the prisoners,” Alex said. “We’ll need a way to get there without being seen—and a flying ship or a unicorn isn’t going to go unnoticed by men from our world.”

“You can take Lester,” Mother Goose said. “That’s why I rode him around the Otherworld—if anyone sees him in the sky they just assume he’s a normal bird.”

“Great,” Alex said. “We’ll leave as soon as possible and get a better idea of what we’re up against.”

None of the fairies argued. For the first time Alex’s word was final and it was respected. With no time to lose, Alex and Conner immediately followed Mother Goose up to the grand balcony. She whistled for Lester and he swooped toward them from the towers above. She pulled his reins down and whispered their plan into his ear.

Froggy and Red were also on the balcony, showing the view of the gardens to Bree and Emmerich. Bree walked over to Conner as soon as she saw him.

"Hi, Bree," Conner said. "How did you sleep?"

"Oh, you know," she said. "As well as anyone could their first night in a new dimension, I suppose."

Conner smiled; he remembered that restless feeling all too well. As tired as she was, Bree still had an excited light in her eyes as she looked around the palace.

"I'm so sorry you guys are stuck here. We're going to get you home as soon as possible," Conner said.

"It's my own fault for wanting an adventure," Bree said. "I made you take me, remember?"

This made Conner feel a little better. He looked over at Emmerich as Froggy pointed out the different parts of the gardens below—he looked like he was having the time of his life. He reminded Conner of himself during his and Alex's first trip into the Land of Stories. He would have given anything to face *those* problems again.

"I've just talked Lester through it," Mother Goose said. "He knows to fly high enough so no one will see you."

"Squaaa." Lester nodded.

"Then let's get going," Alex said.

They climbed aboard the giant goose and took off into the sky, heading in the direction of the prison. They flew over the gardens of the Fairy Kingdom, over the sparkling waters of Mermaid Bay, and saw Pinocchio Prison at the center of the peninsula in southern Eastern Kingdom ahead of them.

"There it is!" Alex pointed out. "Lester, circle the prison until we can see something!"

Lester nodded, and looped the sky above the prison. There was destruction everywhere—Alex and Conner could see the entrance had been blown to bits from all the way in the sky. However, there was no trace of prisoners or soldiers anywhere.

"I think it's safe to get a little closer," Conner said.

Lester gradually descended, circling the prison as cautiously as possible. The closer they got, the more certain they were that no one was around.

They looked for somewhere to land but the prison was covered in enormous spikes to prevent anyone from doing just that. Alex waved her wand at the prison's roof and the spikes turned into tall blades of grass for Lester to land on.

"Okay, let's see if there's anyone left inside," Alex said. She pointed her wand at the roof again and a small hatch appeared. They opened the hatch and dropped inside, landing on the prison's highest floor.

The air inside was very smoky. All the cells on the top floor were wide open and empty. They looked down the center of the prison and saw that all twenty-nine floors below them were exactly the same.

"I don't think anyone's here," Conner said. "It's like they had a fire drill and never came back."

The twins jumped when they suddenly heard a voice that wasn't either of their own. Sitting in a cell on the top floor, by herself, was a woman.

"Pssst!" she said. *"Over here!"*

Alex and Conner approached the woman with caution. Whoever she was, she was still a prisoner and couldn't be trusted. The woman was only a few years older than Red but wasn't aging nearly as gracefully. Her hair was thin and messy and she had bags under her enormous eyes. She wore a plain black dress and no shoes.

"Down here!" the woman called up to them from where she was sitting on the floor. Her voice sounded alarmed but she seemed perfectly comfortable. "You've got to warn someone! An army raided the prison earlier today and took the prisoners with them! They're trying to take over the world!"

Alex and Conner leaned down to speak with her. She stuck her head through the bars as far as it would go.

"We know about the army and are trying to stop them," Alex said. "We've come here to find out more."

"Were the prisoners taken captive or did they join them?" Conner asked.

"They *joined* them," the woman said. "The soldiers opened every cell and gave each prisoner the option of staying or joining their army. And as you can see, it was an almost unanimous decision."

"Why didn't you leave with them?" Alex asked.

The woman looked at them like they were insane. "I'm not going out there," she said and shook her head. "There's nothing for me out there. I

mean, perhaps at one point there was, but not anymore. I belong right here in my cell."

"You've been in here for a long time, haven't you?" Conner asked.

Alex thought there was something curious about her. She saw there was a plaque on the wall next to the woman's cell and Alex stood to read it.

THE LADY GRETEL
SENTENCED TO LIFE IN
PINOCCHIO PRISON FOR THE
MURDER OF SIR HANSEL

Alex gestured for Conner to look at the plaque, too. *"Conner, it's Gretel from 'Hansel and Gretel'!"* she whispered to him. *"She killed her brother!"*

"What?" he whispered back.

"It's all right, you don't have to whisper," Gretel said. "I know what that plaque says. I know who I am. I know what I did."

Alex suddenly had so many questions. "Why did you kill your brother?"

Gretel dreamily stared off into the distance. "Because it was the only way I could be *free*."

"Free from what?" Alex asked.

"From 'Hansel and Gretel,' " Gretel said.

"The story?" Conner asked.

"No, *the label*," Gretel said. Their inquiring looks begged her to explain more. "After my brother and I survived the gingerbread house, all I wanted was to have a normal life—but that's not what Hansel wanted; he wanted us to be *heroes*. He told everyone we knew about what happened to us in the woods and then those people told everyone they knew and soon word spread and we became household names around the kingdoms. We were treated like royalty; parades were thrown for us, we were honored with medals everywhere we went, they even named a holiday after us."

"That sounds pretty nice," Conner said.

Gretel's eyes shot up at him. "No, it was *terrible*," she said. "Because no one cared about *me*, they just cared about 'Hansel and Gretel.' I just wanted to be Gretel, *just Gretel*, but no matter what I did no one would let me be just Gretel. It was like my brother had become an invisible ball and chain I

was forced to carry around for the rest of my life."

"But he was your brother," Alex said. "Didn't you love him?"

Gretel grunted and stuck out her tongue like she had tasted something foul. "No, I couldn't stand him!" she said. "Hansel may have seemed like a nice young man but all he cared about was himself and the attention he got! He used to drag me around with him just so he could get more admiration! Hansel also took all the credit for what happened in the gingerbread house—even though *I* was the one who tricked the witch and pushed her into the fireplace! He wouldn't even be alive without me! Had I known then what I know now, I would have let the witch eat him!"

"So you killed him instead?"

Gretel nodded. "It was an accident. One day we were walking through the trees and he started mentioning all the places he had planned for us to go, all the people we would meet, and all the awards we were going to receive in the upcoming days. Well, I got so mad I pushed him—but I didn't see there was a cliff behind him!"

"Did you tell anyone that it was an accident?" Alex asked.

"I was planning to," Gretel said. "But then I realized this cell allowed me to be something that the rest of the world didn't—*just Gretel*. So I pleaded guilty and have been here ever since. And so, today when the soldiers asked me if I wanted to join their army or stay in this cell I didn't have to think twice."

Gretel sighed at the thought of all the peace her cell brought her. Conner looked at Alex and circled his temple with his finger. *"She's nuts!"* he mouthed.

But Gretel wasn't finished with her story. "The worst thing one person can do to another—besides eat them, of course—is to reduce their identity to being only *half* of something. When someone is treated as *half of* or *less than half of* one identity, they're not being treated like a human at all. Everyone should have the right to individuality."

Conner slowly stood up and walked away from the cell. "Well, thanks, Lady Gretel!" he said. "We should get going now. We need to figure out where this army went."

"Wait!" Gretel said. "I can tell you! The army and the soldiers went back to their camp, but the general and his men were headed somewhere else!"

"Where?" Alex asked.

“I don’t know where, just somewhere else,” Gretel said. “The prisoner across from me—they call him the Masked Man because of the sack he wears over his head—he was talking to the general before they let him out. He convinced the general that he needed a dragon to get rid of the fairies and take over the world! He said it was the only way the general would win!”

Alex and Conner exchanged the same confused look. “A dragon?” Alex asked. “But they’ve been extinct for hundreds of years. Our grandmother and her friends were the ones who fought them off during the Dragon Age.”

“Apparently the Masked Man knows where to find one,” Gretel said. “And I wouldn’t be surprised if he did. He’s a very unusual man. He’s been in that cell for almost a decade now. He likes to talk to himself at night—sometimes I swear I heard someone else in there with him, but that would be impossible.”

Conner walked to the cell of the Masked Man and peeked inside. “Hey, Alex, this guy has a lot of stuff in here.”

Alex joined him at the cell. The door was still open and they walked inside together. Just being in it gave them the creeps. The walls were covered in bizarre carved illustrations of winged creatures, pirate ships, and animals with big ears and feet. There was a pile of coal and he had carved the pieces into the shapes of hooks, hearts, and swords.

An oval mirror in a silver frame hung on the wall.

“What does a Masked Man need with a mirror?” Conner asked.

“I have no idea,” Alex said. “But we should get out of here. We need to fly by their camp and see what the army is up to.”

They left the cell and went back to the hatch in the ceiling. Alex pointed her wand at the floor and the stones rose to form a small staircase for them to climb through the hatch.

“Good-bye!” Gretel called out. “I hope you can stop them!”

“Us too!” Conner said before climbing onto the roof.

“Good-bye, *just Gretel*,” Alex said. “Thank you for your help.”

By the time the twins climbed to the roof, Lester had eaten all the long blades of grass. They hopped aboard the giant goose and took off into the sky again.

“The general told half of his men to set up camp somewhere in the southeast where the portal spit us out,” Conner told his sister. “I bet they’ve

regrouped by now.”

Alex took Lester’s reins and steered him into the sky high above the south of the Eastern Kingdom. Alex and Conner searched the ground as they passed over it, not sure what they were looking for. However, as soon as the camp came into view they knew exactly what it was.

Hundreds of trees had been cut down to make way for the expansive camp the soldiers had built. There were dozens and dozens of large beige tents set up and the timbered trees had been used to build a wall around the camp.

There were thousands of soldiers setting up and marching around the camp and the soldiers weren’t alone. A thousand or so recruits from Pinocchio Prison were scattered around the camp as well. Giant ogres did the heavy lifting as the soldiers built the camp, witches wove broomsticks out of tree branches, and soldiers trained goblins how to fire cannons and trolls how to shoot rifles.

To Alex and Conner’s horror, their target practice was a line of wooden fairy dummies.

“Mother Goose was right,” Conner said. “They’re preparing for *war.*”

Chapter Eighteen

SENDING THE SWANS

Mother Goose stood by the railing of the grand balcony and watched the skies as she waited for Lester and the twins to return. Emmerich and Bree were standing a little ways from her, having the most fascinating conversation with Froggy and Red.

"So there are six kingdoms, two territories, and one empire?" Emmerich asked, wrapping his head around the lesson Froggy was teaching them on the fairy-tale world.

"Precisely!" Froggy said. "And the leaders of the six kingdoms, including the Fairy Council, make up the Happily Ever After Assembly."

Red cleared her throat. "There *used* to be six kingdoms, but now there are *five* kingdoms and one republic."

Bree almost went cross-eyed from all the information. "So Red used to be the queen of her own kingdom, which used to be part of the Northern Kingdom until the C.R.A.B. Revolution, was it?" she asked.

"The C.R.A.W.L. Revolution," Red corrected her. "It stood for Citizen Riots Against Wolf Liberty. The Evil Queen was in power in the Northern Kingdom at the time and she did nothing to stop the wolves terrorizing the farmers' villages. So we revolted and I got my own kingdom."

"Which you just lost in the election for queen," Bree pieced together. "But now the kingdom is a republic because the new queen changed the government. Can she do that?"

"Evidently," Red said, and pursed her lips at the thought of it.

"In our country we have a Congress and a House of Representatives to keep the president from doing things like that, I guess," Bree said.

"Yes, well, *I thought I did, too*," Red said with flared nostrils. "I hand selected representatives so I couldn't be blamed for my biased decision making and the whole kingdom *still* turned on me. I don't know where I went wrong."

"But who is the queen of your country now?" Emmerich asked.

"Little Bo Bimbo," Red replied without a hint of sarcasm. "She's the ugliest, most horrendous creature to ever live in the Red Riding Hood Kingdom and she scared all the villagers into voting for her."

"Now *that* sounds like politics in our world," Bree said.

"I've never heard of Little Bo Bimbo," Emmerich said, and shivered at the thought of her.

"Then you're a very lucky man," Red said. A small smile appeared on her face; it was very therapeutic for her to make things up about Little Bo Peep. She only wished she had done it *during* the election.

"They're back!" Mother Goose said, pointing to the sky.

A shadow passed over the balcony and they looked to the sky and saw Alex and Conner descending on Lester's back. They landed on the balcony and their friends eagerly approached them.

"Well, what did you find?" Mother Goose asked.

"The army recruited the prisoners!" Conner said as he hopped down from the giant goose. "The soldiers were training them for combat when we flew above their camp—there are thousands of them!"

Mother Goose placed a hand over her heart. "Oh dear," she said. "What should we do next?"

"I'm thinking," Alex said as she climbed down from Lester. "In the meantime, Mother Goose, please see that all the Fairy Council members gather in the hall as quickly as possible. Conner, go with her and tell the other fairies about what we've seen. The first thing I need to do is get the kings and queens to the Fairy Palace as quickly as possible so they can join in the conversation. This isn't a Fairy Council matter; it's an issue the entire Happily Ever After Assembly needs to discuss."

Mother Goose and Conner nodded and headed inside the palace. Alex raised her wand in the air and then cracked it like a whip six times. A series of shimmering lights flashed around the balcony and six enormous swans the size of Lester magically appeared in front of her. Alex spun the tip of her wand above the palm of her hand and a stack of papers appeared. She rolled the papers and put one in each swan's mouth.

"What are those?" Froggy asked.

"Invitations," Alex said, and handed Froggy an extra copy to read.

To the members of the Royal Families,

An emergency has occurred and all members of the Happily Ever After Assembly and their families must report to the Fairy Palace immediately. We will provide details of the matter upon your arrival.

Thank you,
Alex Bailey, Acting Fairy Godmother

“I need you to take these to the kings and queens of the Corner Kingdom, the Charming Kingdom, the Northern Kingdom, the Eastern Kingdom, and the Bo Peep Republic as quickly as possible and bring the rulers back,” Alex instructed the first five swans, then turned to the sixth. “As for you, I have other acquaintances I’d like you to deliver this invitation to.”

She whispered further instructions into the swan’s ear so the others couldn’t hear.

“If they don’t cooperate, you have my permission to *persuade* them however you can,” she said. “Bring them back by the ankles if you must—these invitations are not optional. Now go.”

All six swans bowed and then launched into the air one at a time. They flew off in opposite directions at speeds birds had never flown before.

“Now what?” Red asked. “Do you think the kings and queens will take your message seriously?”

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Alex said, hoping with all her heart they would.

After a few hours of waiting, Red and Froggy took Bree and Emmerich inside to give Alex some time to think alone. She paced back and forth so many times she almost left a mark on the floor. When she was studying wars in History in school, Alex had never imagined that one day she would be in one, let alone leading it. Was she equipped to lead the Happily Ever After Assembly into a war against a general of an empire?

She prayed her strengths of common sense and logic would be enough to make up for her lack of battle strategy. She kept thinking about the great war heroes from her world, like Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

What would they have done if they were in her shoes? What sort of plan would they have created? What would her grandmother have done if she wasn't ill?

Alex heard a commotion from above and looked up to the evening sky. One by one the swans came into view as they returned to the palace, bringing the kings and queens from opposite ends of the Land of Stories with them.

Alex sighed with relief as they all glided to her—she was so glad to see none of them had rejected her invitation.

Five swans landed on the balcony one after the other. The first swan carried King Chance, Queen Cinderella, and their two-year-old daughter, Princess Hope, from the Charming Kingdom. The second swan carried Queen Sleeping Beauty and King Chase from the Eastern Kingdom. The third swan carried Queen Snow White and King Chandler from the Northern Kingdom. The fourth swan carried Queen Rapunzel and her husband, Sir William, from the Corner Kingdom. And the fifth swan carried Queen Little Bo Peep.

All the rulers appeared befuddled by their unexpected journey. Queen Little Bo Peep looked a tad intimidated at being among the legendary rulers on the balcony. It was the first time she had been called to participate in the Happily Ever After Assembly.

"Hello, Your Majesties," Alex said. "Thank you all so much for coming."

"Alex, I'm sure we'd all like to know: What is the meaning of this?" Cinderella asked. "And what happened to the Fairy Godmother? Why didn't she send for us herself?"

"Because she's fallen ill," Alex informed them. The royals took the news exactly as the twins had—they didn't even know it was possible for the Fairy Godmother to fall ill. "It's only one of many problems we face, I'm afraid, so if you please, quickly follow me into the hall so you can join our discussion."

She led the parade of monarchs into the Fairy Palace and down the stairs into the hall where Conner, Mother Goose, and the other fairies waited. They were all very surprised to see Conner there, especially Cinderella, who had witnessed the Fairy Godmother close the portal to the Otherworld right in her own kingdom. It didn't take them long to understand something

was seriously wrong.

Froggy, Red, Bree, and Emmerich came down the stairs to see what all the fuss was about. Although Bree and Emmerich had never met any of the kings and queens in person, it didn't take them long to realize who they were looking at; Snow White's pale skin and Rapunzel's long flowing hair were dead giveaways. They stopped in their tracks and sat at the top of the stairs, admiring all the beautiful royals.

Red's first instinct was to join them, but seeing Little Bo in the group of her former peers was a painful reminder that she didn't belong anymore. She sat next to Bree and Emmerich on the stairs and glared at her nemesis from afar.

Froggy rushed down the stairs to say hello to his Charming brothers.

"Charlie, what's happened to you?" Chandler asked.

"Why are you a frog again?" Chance asked, just as curious.

"It's a long story," Froggy told them. "We'll explain everything, I promise."

Alex decided to explain before any more confusion filled the room. "The Fairy Godmother is very sick and her magic is fading," she told everyone. "Her spell on Prince Charlie has worn off and the portal into the Otherworld has been partially re-opened. An army from our world has crossed over and plans to dominate this world, but I'll let Conner tell you about the army since he's seen them up close."

Alex gestured for her brother to take the floor but Mother Goose suddenly rose from her seat.

"No, I'll do it," she said. "It's my fault they're even here, after all."

Alex and Conner looked at each other—they were impressed that she was willing to take responsibility in front of the entire Happily Ever After Assembly.

Mother Goose informed the kings and queens about the Grande Armée and how it was her fault that they had traveled through the portal into the fairy-tale world. She told them how they had raided Pinocchio Prison and recruited its criminals. And last, Mother Goose had the unfortunate task of telling the royals they could be at war very soon.

Alex sat in her chair as the monarchs were informed. She continued thinking of the horrors the future might bring and how they could best be prepared for them.

“So this army of five thousand men now has hundreds of additional soldiers—criminals that *we* put behind bars?” Snow White asked with a hand over her mouth.

“Correct,” Mother Goose said. “And we have a suspicion that it will inspire all the criminals on the loose in the Dwarf Forests and throughout the other kingdoms to join the Armée.”

“And how many criminals total would we say are currently unaccounted for within our kingdoms?” Sleeping Beauty asked.

“We’ve estimated around three thousand or so,” Emerelda told the room.

Rapunzel quickly did the math in her head. “Then that gives the Grande Armée a total of close to nine thousand,” she said. “That’s more than *all our armies* combined.”

“How many soldiers are in your armies?” Conner asked.

“The Northern Kingdom has an army of two thousand men,” Chandler said.

“The Charming Kingdom has one thousand,” Chance said.

“Many of the Eastern Kingdom’s men perished trying to fight off the Enchantress’s curses,” Chase said. “We only have around one thousand five hundred soldiers left.”

“The Corner Kingdom’s army is very small as well, consisting of only five hundred men,” Sir William said.

Little Bo Peep was the only one who hadn’t responded. “I don’t know the exact number, but I would say somewhere around—”

“Eight hundred and twenty-eight men!” Red called down from the top of the stairs.

Little Bo shot her a nasty look. “Yes, thank you, *former Queen* Red Riding Hood,” she said.

The twins were shocked by the low numbers.

“Unlike your world, we’ve never had a real reason until now for large armies,” Mother Goose said.

Conner added these numbers in his head. “So that means with all your armies together the Happily Ever After Assembly has roughly five and a half thousand men. That’s *five and a half* versus a potential *nine thousand*—the Armée could grow up to twice the size of our forces!”

“And that’s still not including the armies of the Elf Empire and the Troblin Territory,” Mother Goose reminded them. “If General Marquis

manages to convince them the way he convinced the prisoners, then it's over. We'll never win this war."

"Then we'll have to get to them first." Alex joined the discussion for the first time. "We need to do whatever it takes to make sure the elves and the troblins are on our side. They may not have a great relationship with the Happily Ever After Assembly but I doubt they want to see the world taken over by the Armée any more than we do. Does anyone know how large the elf and troblin armies are?"

"The trolls and goblins have an army of seven hundred, I believe," Tangerina said. "And the elves have a thousand soldiers."

"Then that's good news for us," Alex said. "After we convince the troblins and the elves to join us, that will raise our army to much better odds of survival. Plus, we have the fairies on our side; we can't forget to include them."

All the fairies behind the podiums objected at once but Xanthous was the loudest. "Fairies can't go into battle; it's against the Happily Ever After Assembly code of magic!" he protested.

"Screw the code!" Conner yelled, and the room went silent. "The code is there to ensure peace and prosperity for the fairy-tale world and soon there may not be a fairy-tale world left! If we want to win this war we will have to fight fire with fire, and Xanthous, no one has more fire than you—and no one can stir the waves better than Skylene—and no one can sting like Tangerina. We're going to have to use every resource possible."

The fairies were morally opposed to the idea with every fiber of their beings, but Conner was right. As long as they were using their magic for the greater good, they had no choice. Alex folded her hands together and looked at the floor as she thought more about what needed to be done.

"All right, I think I have a plan. Everyone listen closely," she said, and gained the room's undivided attention. "We don't know where or how the Grande Armée will strike first—we have to assume it could be anywhere. I want all the kings and queens to write to their commanding officers at once and tell them to split their armies in half. Half of each army will stay in its respective kingdom so nothing is left unguarded. The *other* halves will go into hiding—I don't care where they go as long as they stay out of sight—they are not to come out of hiding until they see my signal."

"But why split up the armies?" Xanthous asked.

“That way no kingdom is left unguarded, in case it’s attacked,” Alex explained. “And if a kingdom is attacked, its entire army won’t be lost.”

Alex turned to face the fairies. “I want you to be with the soldiers guarding the kingdoms,” she said. “Rosette will go to the Corner Kingdom, Skylene to the Northern, Xanthous to the Charming, Tangerina to the Eastern, and Violetta and Coral to the Bo Peep Republic. Mother Goose and Emerelda will stay in the Fairy Kingdom and look after the Fairy Godmother.”

Alex turned back to address the entire room for the conclusion of her plan. “My brother and I will personally go to the troblins and elves and plead with them to join our side. As soon as we recruit the elves and troblins, I’ll signal all the remaining armies, the ones at home and the ones in hiding, and lead them in a strike against the Grande Armée.”

Everyone carefully went over this plan in their heads. It may not have been a perfect strategy, but it was the only strategy they had.

“What’s going to happen to us?” Cinderella asked. “Do we go home to our kingdoms or do we stay at the Fairy Palace?”

“Neither,” Conner said, and stood by his sister. “If the Armée finds you, they’ll kill you—they have a history of killing royal families and aristocrats—to them, death is the only surrender. We have to keep you moving at all times so they can never find you. I would suggest we put you all on a flying ship like the *Granny* but if the Armée saw that in the sky they would freak out and definitely shoot you down.”

“Then what can we place them on that’s both secretive and continuously moving?” Alex asked.

Her words rang a bell. Conner knew he had heard of something recently that met this description; he just had to think. He thought back to the very beginning of this whole ordeal, when he was standing in the cemetery listening to the Brothers Grimm stories, and the answer came to him. The Brothers Grimm hadn’t just provided a warning, they had also provided a plan.

“I’ve got it!” Conner said. “We’ll put them on *an enchanted path* just like in the story ‘The Secret Castle’! The path could weave through the kingdoms like a snake, never traveling in the same direction twice and never leaving a trail behind it!”

“That’s brilliant!” Alex said. “And the only people who will be able to

find it are the people who know about it! As long as the Armée never knows about the path, they'll never find it."

Conner stepped closer to Alex and whispered something in her ear so only she could hear. "*Do you think you can create the path, Alex?"* He didn't want to fill the room with hope if Alex wasn't capable of the enchantment.

Alex took a deep breath. "Yes," she said. "I know I can." She looked up to the top of the stairs where the others sat. "Red, we can use the carriages you arrived in. They were very plain and didn't bear any symbols of royalty."

Red grunted. "Don't remind me."

Alex eyed the official robes, crowns, and jewels all the kings and queens wore. "We should also strip you down so you look less official," she said. "You can't wear any jewelry or be followed by guards or do anything that would make you appear royal."

"But surely we can't go on this path unprotected," Snow White said.

"We'll need *some* form of protection," Sleeping Beauty said. "Even if the path is as disguised as we are."

Alex looked to the sky to think about this. A big smile grew on her face for the first time all day. "I know the perfect people," Alex said. They were flying right above her. Everyone looked to the sky to see what Alex was smiling about.

The sixth swan was finally returning to the Fairy Palace; it landed in the hall. All the monarchs and fairies were stunned to see Jack and Goldilocks climb off the swan's back. Alex had secretly sent one of the swans to find her fugitive friends.

"You invited *them*?" Red yelled from the top of the stairs.

"Yes, I figured it wouldn't hurt having a few friends around," Alex said. "But now we have the perfect assignment for them."

They waved uncomfortably at the royals in the hall. Less than a year ago the kings and queens had agreed to clear them of all their crimes as a way of thanking them for helping to defeat the Enchantress—and since then, despite the gesture, Jack and Goldilocks had already committed multiple crimes in all their kingdoms.

"Hello, everyone," Jack said. "What's the occasion?"

"We got your letter, Alex," Goldilocks said. "We figured it had been sent

to us by mistake, but the swan was *very* persuasive." She and Jack held up their arms and showed the bite marks they had endured trying to avoid the trip.

Alex and Conner quickly told them about the Grande Armée and their plans to conquer the fairy-tale world. Jack and Goldilocks knew much more than they expected—word of the Grande Armée was spreading through the kingdoms.

"Many of the criminals we know have already joined them," Jack said. "The Armée is growing by the minute."

"Jack, Goldilocks, I need a big favor," Alex said. "We're sending the kings and queens away so the Armée can never find them. I'm going to ask that you go with them and protect them just as you protected my brother and me during our quest to stop the Enchantress."

Jack and Goldilocks looked at each other—it was a big favor. The kings and queens began mumbling their objections to one another. How were a couple of crooks supposed to protect them?

Red whistled from the top of the stairs to get the room's attention. "I know what you're thinking because there isn't a negative thought I haven't had myself about these two," Red declared. "But I can assure you there is no one in the world Goldilocks can't take on with her sword, or that Jack can't face with an axe at his side. We wouldn't have survived our trip around the kingdoms if they hadn't been there. You'll be well protected under their care."

Jack, Goldilocks, and the twins did a double take. They couldn't believe Red was defending them to all these people.

"Thank you, Red," Goldilocks said. "I would have never expected praise from you."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Goldie," Red said excitedly. "I have a new nemesis now! So you're off the hook!"

Red gave Goldilocks a thumbs-up. Little Bo rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

"Very well," Cinderella said, and held Princess Hope a little tighter than before. "If you trust them, I suppose they're the best people for the job."

"Then it's decided," Emerelda declared. "Now we mustn't waste another minute. Let's get the kings and queens to safety."

The fairies magically transformed the royals' regal wardrobes into

simple, common clothing. They were provided with parchment and scrolls and wrote to their commanding officers to inform them to split the armies as Alex had instructed. All the fairies, except Emerelda and Mother Goose, took the letters and disappeared into thin air, traveling to the kingdoms they had been assigned.

As they did this, Conner climbed to the top of the stairs to speak with Bree and Emmerich. “I want you guys to go with the kings and queens on the secret path,” he said. “I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you. You’ll be safe if you’re with Jack and Goldilocks, I promise.”

Bree and Emmerich both nodded, wide-eyed. The events of the past twenty-four hours had caused their heads to spin so fast they couldn’t think straight. They would have agreed to anything.

“Certainly,” Emmerich said.

“Sounds good,” Bree said.

Conner smiled and then faced Red. “I want you and Froggy to go as well so Bree and Emmerich have someone they know with them,” he said. “Besides, I know Alex and I will feel better knowing *all* our friends are safe.”

“What?” Red asked sharply. “You want me stuck in a traveling party with *that Peep woman*?”

“I’m really sorry you lost your throne, Red,” Conner said. “But if the Armée finds you, they won’t care that you *used* to be queen. I know you love necklaces, but I don’t think wearing a guillotine will be a good look for you.”

“Fine,” Red agreed. “But if we get captured I’m volunteering Little Bo for target practice.”

Once all the monarchs had been disguised, everyone left the hall, following Alex outside to the front steps of the Fairy Palace. Three carriages were lined up in front of the Fairy Palace with two horses each.

King Chance, Queen Cinderella, and Princess Hope climbed into the first carriage with Queen Sleeping Beauty and King Chase. Queen Snow White and King Chandler joined Queen Rapunzel and Sir William in the second carriage. Froggy, Red, Emmerich, and Bree boarded the third carriage, and to Red’s dismay, were joined by Queen Little Bo Peep.

“Will someone please put me *back* inside the wolf’s stomach?” Red

agonized.

“This is going to be a *long* trip.” Little Bo sighed and shook her head.

Bree stepped outside the carriage before the door was shut and gave Conner a massive hug. “Please stay safe,” she said.

The gesture made Conner turn bright pink. “Don’t worry about me,” he said. “I’m used to being in danger.”

Conner shut the carriage door behind her with a tap for good luck. Cinderella poked her head out of the first carriage to get Conner’s attention.

“I was just wondering if you’ve heard from my stepmother and stepsisters,” she asked. “Are they all right in the Otherworld?”

“Oh yeah,” Conner said. “The last time I talked to them Lady Iris and Rosemary had opened a diner and Petunia was working at an animal hospital. They seemed very happy.”

Hearing this made Cinderella very happy, too. Conner was glad he could provide her with a bit of joy before she departed on the secret path.

Jack and Goldilocks mounted the horses attached to the first carriage so they could keep watch as they traveled. Emerelda bewitched the carriages to drive themselves while Alex stood in front of the first carriage, ready to create her biggest enchantment yet.

“Okay,” Alex whispered to herself. *“Here I go.”*

Alex visualized the path as clearly as she could. She imagined it snaking through the kingdoms, never giving any indication of where it was headed and leaving no trace of where it had been. She touched the ground with the tip of her wand and a shimmering golden path appeared on the ground ahead of her. It was less than a quarter mile long and disappeared at both ends.

Jack and Goldilocks held the reins of the horses and the parade of carriages took off down the secret path. Alex joined Emerelda, Mother Goose, and her brother on the front steps and they waved the travelers off until the golden path and the carriages snaked out of sight.

Emerelda placed a hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Your grandmother would be very proud of you.”

“I know,” Alex said sadly. She just wished she could have been there to see it.

Emerelda, Mother Goose, and Conner went back into the Fairy Palace. Alex was just about to turn and go with them when she saw someone she

had completely forgotten about for the past few hours.

"Rook!" Alex said. He was peeking out from behind one of Rosette's magically enlarged roses.

"Alex, are you coming inside?" Conner asked.

"Yes, I'll be there in a minute," she said, and ran into the gardens to see Rook. She pulled him behind a giant patch of tulips and threw her arms around his neck.

"Sorry to intrude again, I just haven't seen you in a while and was worried. What were all those carriages for—" Rook said, but his cheerful expression quickly faded once he saw the seriousness in her eyes. "Alex, what's wrong?"

"Everything," she said, and fought back tears. She had held it together very well today, but Rook was the only person she didn't feel like she had to be brave in front of. "My grandmother is sick and there's an army that's invaded and trying to take over the world!"

"What?" Rook said. "What do you mean there's an army—"

Alex grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer to look directly in his eyes. "You and your dad have to get as far away from here as possible," she said. "You have to leave before you get hurt!"

"I hope this isn't your way of letting me down gently," Rook said, trying to make her laugh.

"I'm serious, Rook," Alex said. "Please, you have to go! I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to you! Promise me you'll get out of here!"

"All right, all right. I promise to get my dad and we'll leave."

Alex sighed and looked to the ground. "Good," she said. "I have to get back to the palace now; there are so many things we still need to plan."

Rook looked at her with the saddest eyes Alex had ever seen. "But when will I see you again?"

"I don't know. I'll find you once all of this is over and done with. Now please go so I don't worry about you on top of it all."

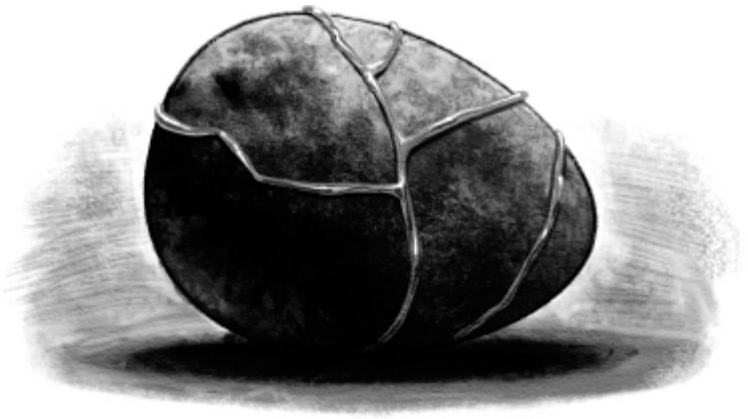
Rook nodded. He kissed her on the cheek and then headed home.

Sitting behind the tulips, it was the first time Alex had been out of sight all day. She kneeled on the ground, closed her eyes, and just breathed. She had put on a good show for the fairies and the royals and her brother, but after seeing Rook, all the emotion built up inside her young body suddenly

surged through her.

“Just breathe, Alex, just breathe,” she said to herself. “You can handle this, you can handle this.”

She stayed behind the tulips until she felt the fear fade from her eyes and her brave face returned.



Chapter Nineteen

AN ICY TRADE

The soldiers shivered in the freezing winds. The elements had grown too harsh for their horses so they were left behind and the soldiers were forced to trek through the thick snow on foot. For hours and hours they climbed higher and higher into the steep mountains of the north without a disclosed destination or an anticipated time of arrival.

"How much farther?" General Marquis demanded.

"Once we see the lights, we'll know we've arrived," the Masked Man called to the men behind him.

A unit that started out as twenty Grande Armée soldiers had been reduced to less than a dozen. The soldiers were dropping like flies as the Masked Man led them through the cold. Every few hundred yards a soldier would faint from the elements and disappear into the snow. They were ordered to keep moving and the fallen were left behind.

General Marquis and Colonel Baton wore thick coats over their uniforms as they traveled, and although the withering soldiers behind them were given very little to shield themselves from the cold with, they were scolded for slowing the expedition down. The Masked Man had only been given a raggedy old blanket to stay warm but he still moved more agilely than the rest of them. He had braved these mountains many times before.

"You lot certainly don't handle the cold very well." The Masked Man chuckled.

"I am starting to lose my patience," the general threatened.

"Don't fret, General, we're almost there," the Masked Man assured him.

Soon the northern lights he had described came into view. They illuminated the dark sky in bright shades of green and circled above the glaciers ahead. By the time they reached the glaciers, the unit had been reduced to six men including the general and Colonel Baton. The Masked Man led the remaining men through an opening between two glaciers and into an enormous icy maze. They zigzagged between the glaciers and

eventually stepped into a wide crater.

“Gentlemen, welcome to the Snow Queen’s lair,” the Masked Man announced.

The soldiers gazed around at the crater in bewilderment. Several pillars of ice surrounded the crater, a frozen lake acted as its floor, and a frozen waterfall spilled inside from the mountains above and flowed around a giant icy throne. The Snow Queen sat on the throne with her faithful polar bears, one sitting on either side of her. She wore a large white fur coat and a snowflake crown. A cloth was wrapped over her empty eye sockets. The Snow Queen and the polar bears were eerily quiet, as if they had been waiting for the soldiers to arrive.

“The Masked Man has returned again,” the Snow Queen said in her raspy crackling voice. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“Hello, Your Majesty,” the Masked Man said, and gave a shallow bow. “It’s been a very long time but you look as frigid as ever.”

“Compliments will get you nowhere,” the Snow Queen said. “If it’s a trade you’ve come to make, you know what I want in return.”

“No, I understand,” the Masked Man said. “The last time I was here, you made it perfectly clear what you wanted in exchange for the *item of interest*, and with great pleasure I have returned with the means of finally making that trade.”

The general suddenly grew very tense. “You never said anything about a trade,” he sneered.

The Masked Man gestured for him to remain calm. “Your Majesty, this is General Marquis of the Grande Armée,” he introduced.

“I know who he is,” the Snow Queen snapped. “I prophesied the general and his Armée entering this world long before you were born.”

Something about this was very unsettling to the general and he motioned for his soldiers to stand alert, but the Masked Man assured him this was good news. “Splendid,” he said. “Then you know that in exchange for the dragon egg, he can provide you with what you’ve always wanted.”

“Capable he may be, but faithful to keeping his end of a bargain I’ve yet to see,” the Snow Queen said. “The future is filled with many certainties and many uncertainties for the general. Long ago I foresaw him and his Armée sweeping across the land and conquering everything in their path, but I do not see him rising against the fairies. If he wishes to claim this

world, he'll need my trust in the deal we're about to make."

"And what exactly is the deal?" the general asked, stepping closer to her.

The Snow Queen smiled and her jagged teeth were exposed. "Many years ago I was the ruler of the Northern Kingdom until my throne was stolen from me. If the general wants my dragon egg so he can conquer this world as intended, he must promise to give me back the Northern Kingdom when he succeeds."

This was news to the general and it infuriated him. "Excuse me for a moment, Your Coldness," he said to the Snow Queen. He grabbed the Masked Man by the lapel and threw him against a pillar to the side of the crater.

"You never mentioned anything about a trade!" he whispered.

"General, you have to trust me," the Masked Man whispered back. *"This is the only way you can win this war. Make this trade with the Snow Queen and it won't matter what she is promised in return—once you have a dragon in your power, you'll be unstoppable! You can obliterate her and anything in your way."*

The general thought it over but the anger never left his eyes. "Very well," he said. He faced the Snow Queen. "If you supply me with a dragon egg now, when we take over you have my word that the north shall be yours again."

A deep and raspy celebratory laugh erupted out of the Snow Queen's mouth. "Music to my ears," she said. "Your offer is accepted, but it comes with a warning. I foresee nothing but greatness for you if you keep your end of our bargain, but if you betray me I foresee your quest ending with a scorching demise."

The general's left eye started to twitch. Clearly the Snow Queen was trying to trick him with visions she hadn't seen. He quickly glanced at the Masked Man, who silently urged him to proceed.

"Understood," the general said. "We have a deal."

The soldiers felt a rumble beneath them. They looked through the ice under their feet and saw bubbles appear as something large and round slowly floated toward them from the depths of the lake. A dragon egg surfaced and bobbed against the ice below the frozen lake.

General Marquis turned to his men. "Don't just stand there! Retrieve it!" he ordered.

The soldiers went to the dragon egg and beat the ice above it with the backs of their rifles. The ice began to break and General Marquis and Colonel Baton stood away from it. One of the soldiers fell through the cracking ice and into the freezing water underneath. The Snow Queen laughed, wildly amused by their attempts to get the egg. The man's fall created a huge hole in the ice and the dragon egg soon drifted into it and floated to reaching distance.

"No one move!" the Masked Man yelled, and the two remaining soldiers stood still. He carefully got to his hands and knees and slid across the icy floor and pulled the dragon egg out of the water. "*Cold—cold!*" he shrieked. He juggled the egg back and forth between his hands and wrapped it in his raggedy blanket. The egg was so cold his hands burned from its touch.

The dragon egg was twice the size of the Masked Man's head. It was the shape of a regular egg but was covered in a black shell with the same rough texture as coal. Cracks the egg had received over the years were covered in gold to preserve it, like a rotting tooth. The Masked Man stared down proudly at the egg as if he were holding his firstborn child—he had dreamed about this moment for a very long time.

General Marquis promptly approached him and took the egg out of his hands. "Wonderful," he said, and stared down at the egg with wide inquisitive eyes, as if he were looking into a crystal ball at his future. "Colonel Baton, please shoot the Masked Man; his services are no longer needed."

Colonel Baton retrieved a pistol from inside his coat and aimed it at the Masked Man.

"*Whoa, whoa, whoa,*" the Masked Man said, and raised his hands. "*You can't kill me! You still need me!*"

"We have acquired the egg and will not waste another moment on your nonsense," the general said, and nodded for the colonel to fire at will.

"But someone's got to take care of the egg—and I doubt you or any of your men know how to properly hatch and raise a dragon," the Masked Man said.

"And what makes you an expert?" the general asked spitefully.

"I've spent years trying to get my hands on this egg," the Masked Man said. "I know everything there is to know about dragons! Now we have to

get the egg into something very hot. The hotter the environment, the faster and stronger the dragon will grow—and I have a *very hot* place in mind if we keep working together."

A noise came out of General Marquis that was half a grunt and half a sigh. He had been looking forward to getting rid of the Masked Man since they left the prison, but now he would have to wait a little longer. He shook his head at Baton and the pistol was put away.

"It seems the Masked Man has proven himself useful again," the general said. "You may stay alive long enough to properly hatch and raise the dragon for me. Now escort us out of these icy mountains before you cause my irritation to trump my need for efficiency."

General Marquis glared at him and then headed toward the opening in the crater they had entered from. Colonel Baton and the remaining two soldiers followed him. The Masked Man rubbed his chest to calm his beating heart—he would have to keep himself as useful as possible in the days ahead if he wanted to keep his life.

"Thank you, Your Shiveringness," the Masked Man said to the Snow Queen. He bowed and quickly caught up with the rest of his party. As soon as he and the soldiers were gone, another raspy laugh erupted from the Snow Queen and echoed through the canyon.

"What do you find so amusing, My Grace?" the polar bear to her left asked.

A malicious smirk grew on the Snow Queen's face. "I suddenly foresee something very certain in the forthcoming days for our masked friend," she said.

"What does Your Highness see?" the polar bear to her right asked.

"His mask has successfully concealed who he is for an impressive length of time," she said. "But by the time the week is up, his worst fear will be realized when his identity is revealed to the person he most wishes to keep it secret from."

Chapter Twenty

THE GREAT TROBLIN LAKE

The twins barely slept after sending the royals and their friends on the secret path, and were both up before sunrise. The few hours they'd managed to sleep were from worrying their bodies to the point of exhaustion, and had little to do with rest. They met Mother Goose on the grand balcony of the Fairy Palace just as the sun rose over the Fairy Kingdom. She was prepping Lester to take them on their journey to the Troblin Territory and the Elf Empire.

"I want you to listen to Conner and Alex and do exactly what they say, fly very carefully, always be aware of the sky around you, and make sure every landing is as safe and secure as possible," she instructed him. "In other words, do everything you don't usually do for me."

Lester nodded, and ruffled his feathers, making them nice and fluffy for their upcoming flight.

"Are you sure you're up for this, Lester?" Conner asked. "We could take one of those enchanted swans if you're having any hesitations."

Lester opened his beak and glared at him—insulted just by the thought of it. He grabbed his own reins with his mouth and shoved them into Conner's hand. He was definitely ready for this.

"I'll take that as a yes," Conner said with a laugh. He and his sister each swung a leg over the large goose. They sat on his back with Conner in the front.

"Our first stop is the Troblin Territory, Lester," Alex said. "And after what I hope will be a successful visit, we'll be on our way to the Elf Empire."

"Who's in charge of the Elf Empire?" Conner asked.

Mother Goose huffed uneasily just at the mention of it. "Elvina the Elf Empress," she said.

"She's *not* a friend of yours, I take it," Conner said.

"Just be cautious around her," she warned them. "Empress Elvina is just

as cunning as she is beautiful. She's like a poisonous flower, pretty and peaceful on the outside but dangerous on the inside. Don't let her fool you; no matter what she promises, her loyalty will always be to her own people before it is to the greater good."

Conner gulped. "Poisonous flower, gotcha," he said.

"Elves are very sharp and known for their long memory—and boy, can they hold a grudge," Mother Goose continued. "They'll be very hesitant at first to cooperate but don't let it dishearten you. They've never forgiven the Fairy Council for not including them in the Happily Ever After Assembly and have not talked to us since."

"If they haven't talked to you in so long, what makes you think they'll talk to us?" Alex asked.

Mother Goose shrugged. "Beats me," she said. "Good luck, kiddos. I'll be right here as soon as you get back."

Her words of advice did the opposite of comforting them. Lester took a few steps backward and stretched out his wings. He waddled forward and began flapping until he and the twins lifted off the balcony and flew into the sky. Soon Mother Goose and the Fairy Palace were out of sight.

"Who would have thought you and I would be saving the world again so soon after the last time," Conner said with a nervous laugh to break the tension.

"I always hoped the portal between our worlds would re-open somehow, but never at this price," Alex said. "It's like *an eye for an arm* is our trading standard."

"I know what you mean," Conner said, and thought of something to lighten their spirits. "Do you ever think about what our lives would be like if we had never discovered the Land of Stories? Do you ever wonder what you and I would be doing right now if Grandma and Dad weren't from the fairy-tale world?"

Alex smiled at the thought. "I'd probably be thinking about colleges and careers instead of wars and battles."

Conner laughed at his own prediction. "And I'd just be trying to survive Algebra, not an army of thousands."

His sister laughed along but her smile quickly faded. They had experienced many extraordinary things but had also given up a lot because of who they were.

“Think of all the normal teenage things we could be experiencing,” she said with a sigh so heavy it was obviously carrying more than one thought. “After this chapter of our lives, I wonder if I’ll ever enjoy anything without the constant fear of losing it.”

“By the way,” Conner said, reading between the lines of what his sister was saying. “Who was that guy you were talking to last night in the fairy gardens?”

Conner felt his sister’s body tense up behind him. “What are you talking about?” Alex said, attempting to play dumb. “The boy in the gardens? Oh, you’re talking about *Rook Robins*—the farmer boy from the Eastern Kingdom. He’s just a friend I made recently.”

“Rook Robins?” Conner said. “He sounds like a baseball player. Are you sure he’s *just* a friend?”

For a reason he couldn’t explain, Conner instantly disliked everything about the guy.

“Oh please, Conner,” Alex said defensively. “As if I’ve had time for anything like romance while joining the Fairy Council and leading the Happily Ever After Assembly into a war.”

Alex hated lying to her brother but she would never hear the end of it if he knew the truth, especially if he knew Rook was one of the reasons she had missed his attempts at contacting her while he was in Germany. Conner was glad Alex was sitting behind him so she couldn’t see the look he was giving her. He knew exactly what was going on whether his sister wanted to admit it or not.

“You know, you could tell me if he was more than a friend—I promise I wouldn’t tell Mom,” Conner said, already anxious to tell their mom everything he knew.

Alex laughed it off. “You’ll be the first person to know if my relationship with Rook unexpectedly progresses into anything more, but it doesn’t look like that will be possible at the moment,” she said sharply.

“That’s good, but if he breaks your heart I’ll beat him up for you,” Conner said.

Alex burst into laughter. “Now that’s something I’d pay to see,” she said, and quickly changed the topic so she’d feel less exposed. “But while we’re on the subject, I’ve been meaning to ask you, do you have a crush on your friend Bree?”

Had Lester been a car, Conner would have slammed on the brakes. Instead he abruptly grabbed ahold of the reins and caused Lester to squawk. He blushed so much Alex could see it on the back of his neck and ears.

"Do I have a crush on Bree?" Conner said like it was a preposterous thought. "Come on, Alex, just because I asked you a couple harmless questions about your love life doesn't mean you have to be rude."

Alex grunted at the double standard her brother set. "I'm not being rude, I just figured I would ask since you turn bright red whenever you're around her or her name gets brought up," she pointed out. "Last night when she hugged you good-bye I thought your head was about to explode—I wouldn't be surprised if she had a crush on you, too."

Conner started smiling and couldn't stop. *Did Bree have a crush on him, too?* He'd never thought it was a possibility until now. Had she traveled around Europe with him not only because she wanted to have an adventure but also because she wanted to spend time with him? He quickly forced his smile to diminish when he remembered he was in the middle of defending himself.

"Rest assured, I don't have any feelings whatsoever for Bree," he said. "To be honest, she was starting to get on my nerves when we were in Europe. The way she always second-guessed me, the way she remained so calm in any situation, the way she wore her hair under a beanie with her streaks of blue and pink in the front, the fact that she surprised me every day with a new interesting fact about herself… it was all so annoying."

Alex didn't have to question further—it was obvious how Conner really felt. She was glad he couldn't see her raised eyebrow. "Uh-huh, sounds like you haven't given her much thought at all," she said. "I'm actually glad there's nothing going on."

"Why is that?" Conner asked, and became overly defensive in the opposite direction now. "You don't think I'm mature enough to have a crush on someone or for someone to have a crush on me? For your information, I'm a catch, too—"

"No," Alex interrupted. "Because we're about to visit our old friend Trollbella, and we're not leaving without the support of her army—even if it means you have to marry her."

Conner moaned a long weary sound under his breath. He had almost forgotten about the young troll queen who had been madly in love with him

since they met.

“Gosh, I hope divorce exists in this world,” he said.

The twins remained fairly quiet for the remainder of their trip into the Troblin Territory, fearing they would expose more about themselves than they were willing to. They knew each other so well it was a wonder why either ever tried fooling the other.

The mountainous boulders surrounding the Troblin Territory appeared on the horizon and Lester began his gradual descent. As they flew closer Conner was surprised to see that the land between the boulders was covered in water. The entire territory looked like a massive aboveground pool.

“Wait a second,” Conner said. “They never drained their territory after the Enchantress flooded it?”

“Nope,” Alex said. “The fairies offered to completely restore the land but Queen Trollbella had something else in mind.”

“What was that?” he asked.

“You’ll see,” she said.

Lester swooped into the territory and landed smoothly on the water. He was like a miniature boat as they traveled across the giant lake the territory had become.

“No way,” Conner said in shock when he saw what his sister was talking about. Queen Trollbella had turned her territory into a vast floating city.

Hundreds of forts crafted from the wreckage of their ruined underground home floated in the waters ahead of them. Troll and goblin families occupied the smaller forts while the larger forts served as common areas shared between them. Some of the goblins swam from fort to fort while trolls glided over the water in wooden floating devices. Many sat on the edges of the forts with their enormous feet in the water, and held fishing poles—although the twins were pretty sure there were no fish to catch. The trolls and goblins were darker than usual now that they lived above the ground. The sun had tanned their skin to dark shades of green and blue and brown.

Despite the environmental change, all the creatures looked incredibly bored as they drifted in the water. Alex and Conner floating past them on the giant goose was the most interesting thing they had seen in weeks and caused quite the scene.

“They sure are hard up for entertainment,” Conner said, and his sister

nodded.

The twins heard a familiar voice as a long and wide boat traveled toward them.

"Row, troblins! Row!" Queen Trollbella ordered. She lay leisurely across the front of the boat and took in the sun. A dozen trolls and a dozen goblins were seated in the center of the boat and rowed long oars as they were ordered. The boat drifted slightly to one side since the trolls' arms were shorter.

A young male troll stood at the back of the boat and monitored the rowers. He was short and stout just like Trollbella and wore a large horned helmet and a breastplate. All the rowers came to an abrupt stop as soon as they saw the twins floating on Lester in the water beside them. They pointed at the large goose and whispered among themselves as all the creatures on the surrounding forts had.

"Did I say you could stop rowing?" Trollbella said. When the rowing stayed at a halt, she agitatedly sat up to see what the concern was. She cupped her gaping mouth when she laid eyes on what the others had seen.

"Hi, Trollbella," Conner said sheepishly, with a wave. "Miss me?"

"Butterboy!" She gasped. "Am I really seeing you or are you a mirage in the water?"

"He's here," Alex said. "We're *both* here."

"But I thought I had lost my Butterboy forever," Trollbella said in complete shock. "You went home through that portal and I thought you'd never return! Was our love too strong for the portal to contain? Did our affection for each other break it open? Have you finally returned to be the king of the Great Troblin Lake?"

"Um… *no*," Conner clarified. "But the portal *has* been re-opened—that's why I'm here."

"The Great Troblin Lake, huh?" Alex asked. "Is that what you're calling this place now?"

"Yes, fairy girl," Trollbella said with a scowl. "And I expect all the maps to be changed at once! I've always wanted to live near the water and the Enchantress unintentionally made that dream come true. Now you must come aboard my boat so I can properly embrace my Butterboy."

Lester swam to the side of the boat and Alex and Conner were helped aboard by two of the troll rowers. Trollbella leaped onto Conner like a

spider monkey hugging a tree and almost knocked both of them into the water. He figured it would take her a while to let him go but she detached much sooner than he was expecting. She looked up at him and her big eyes were full of concern rather than the usual lust. Something was very different about Trollbella but the twins were too pressed for time to find out what.

“Look, Trollbella,” Conner said. “We’ve come to talk to you. Something very bad has happened and we need your help.”

Trollbella put both of her hands on her hips. “It puts a strain on our relationship when you only come to me to share devastating news, Butterboy,” she said. “Just once I wish you’d bring flowers or chocolates instead.”

“For the millionth time, we don’t have a *relationship*!” Conner said.

“Yes, I know our love is too strong for childish terms,” she said. “Our love is bottomless… it’s forever… it’s indestructible.…” The troll queen suddenly burst into tears.

“Trollbella, what’s the matter with you?” Alex asked.

“There is something my Butterboy must know before we speak any further,” Trollbella said. “While you were gone, *I found someone else*.”

“What?” the twins said together. This was the last thing they had expected to come out of the troll queen’s mouth.

Trollbella’s eyes darted around the boat guiltily and she turned away from them—what she had to confess was too painful to say while looking them in the eyes. “I knew after you disappeared into another dimension forever it would be challenging to keep our love alive. I tried to stay faithful to you for as long as I could and it was the hardest six days of my life. I was weak without you, Butterboy, and my heart strayed. I couldn’t bear the thought of being alone forever so *I gave my heart to someone else*.”

Alex and Conner exchanged the same dumbfounded look. With everything else going on at the moment, Conner was surprised by how much relief he felt upon hearing this.

“I always thought that one day if the impossible should happen and you returned to me I could easily give my heart back to you, but now seeing you in front of me, I realize I was mistaken,” Trollbella said. “Once I’ve invested my love in someone I cannot get my love back unless I know it’s a dead end, and I’m afraid I’ve planned a long, joyous road with my new love.”

“Okay, I’ve got to know, who is this poor guy?” Conner couldn’t help but ask.

“His name is Gator, and he commands my army as well as my heart,” Trollbella said. She dreamily looked to the back of her boat and waved at the small troll in the horned helmet. Gator waved back uncomfortably—apparently *reciprocation* wasn’t something Trollbella looked for in a relationship.

“Congratulations,” Conner said to them both.

“But I’ve failed you, Butterboy!” Trollbella said, and she fell to her knees. “I promised myself our love would be eternal and I’ve broken that vow! You’ll never love anyone else as much as you’ve loved me! I feel so terrible to leave you alone in this cruel world! Please tell me if there is anything I can do to make it up to you!”

Alex nudged Conner and cleared her throat. *This was their chance.*

“I don’t know,” Conner said, and gave his best heartbroken performance. “I’m in shock, complete shock. My heart feels like it’s been ripped out of my chest, trampled by a stampede of wolves, and chewed up by an ogre. I’m going to need some time to get over this—”

“But there is something you could do for him that would make him feel *much* better in the meantime,” Alex said, trying to speed things up.

“Oh yes, Butterboy!” Trollbella groveled at his feet. “I’d do anything to ease your broken heart! Please, the guilt is too much to bear! Just say the word!”

“Well…,” Conner said melodramatically. “If you’re serious about healing my emotional wounds, mending the pieces of my heart, and sewing the seams of my soul… access to your army would help me greatly.”

“You want my army?” Trollbella asked. She looked up at him questioningly. Even her Butterboy might have overstepped his boundaries with this request.

“Yes, but there’s an even bigger reason why we need it,” Conner said.

“Trollbella, an army of thousands of men has invaded this world and they plan on taking over—” Alex tried to explain, but Trollbella interrupted her.

“Hush, fairy girl!” the troll queen demanded. “This has nothing to do with you. Keep your wand out of our business!”

Alex rolled her eyes and gestured to her brother to explain the rest.

Conner quickly told her about the Grande Armée and how they needed the troblins' help to stop them. His explanation may not have captivated the troll queen but it sparked the interest of all the other creatures around.

"I'll go!" said one of the rowing goblins.

"That sounds terrific!" an eavesdropping troll said from one of the forts nearby.

"I'm not even in the army but I'll help you fight!" said a desperate goblin.

"Me too!" said another troll.

The twins were so excited to see their enthusiasm. Life on a floating city must have been really dull if the idea of war sounded intriguing.

Trollbella squinted and crossed her arms as she thought about it. "But still, an army in exchange for a broken heart seems like a pretty steep deal," she said.

Without missing a beat, Conner clutched his chest and fell to the deck in pain. "Oh my broken heart! It hurts so much! Oh the pain, the miserable pain!" he screamed.

"Your heart is on the other side of your chest, Conner," Alex whispered down at him and he quickly made the correction.

Tears formed in Trollbella's eyes at the sight of her Butterboy in pain she had caused him. "Oh no, Butterboy!" she said, and rushed to his side. "If my army will help ease your pain, then my army you shall have!"

Conner quickly sat up, completely fine. "Thank goodness," he said. "I really appreciate it! Now we need to gather up your army and fill them in on our plan as soon as possible."

Queen Trollbella got to her feet to address the rowers aboard her boat. "Take us to the army fort at once, troblins!" she ordered. "My Butterboy needs to speak with our army and start his healing process."

The troll and goblin rowers turned the boat completely around and headed in the direction of the army float. Alex gestured for Lester to follow the boat, and helped Conner to his feet.

"Nice going," she whispered in his ear.

"Thanks," Conner said, but his face fell into a pout.

"What's wrong?" she said. "We recruited the troblin army and it was easier than either of us expected!"

"I know," Conner said sadly. "I just can't believe Trollbella picked that

troll over *me*.”

Chapter Twenty-One

FROM THE ASHES

The secret path weaved through the countryside, crossed rivers without bridges, and climbed over mountains that roads had never been built on as the carriages traveled through the kingdoms. Jack and Goldilocks were very attentive to the land surrounding them and so far they hadn't encountered any problems during their covert tour. However peaceful the land outside the carriages was, though, the inside of the third carriage was another story.

Red had managed to bite her tongue since they left the Fairy Kingdom. She and Little Bo hadn't said a word the entire trip and the others stayed just as silent, afraid any conversation might send the two into a vicious argument. Instead, as if they were watching a tennis match, Froggy, Bree, and Emmerich watched Red and Little Bo exchange spiteful looks back and forth.

The silence finally became too much for Red and she tried speaking to Little Bo as diplomatically as she could.

"So, Little Bo," Red said. "Have you enjoyed being queen of my kingdom—excuse me—*your* kingdom?"

"Yes" was all Little Bo replied. She stared at Red stoically and didn't look away, as if Red was playing a childish game she didn't want to participate in.

The others in the carriage traded uncomfortable looks. It was inevitable that this conversation would end in disaster.

"*Good to hear,*" Red lied through a clenched jaw. "Have you fulfilled all the promises you made to the people during the election?"

"Almost," Little Bo said, and still her stoic expression didn't fade.

"*Wonderful,*" Red peeped. "And how are the House of Progress representatives?"

"They were all replaced with actual representatives from the village," Little Bo informed her.

Red couldn't help but let a high-pitched snicker escape her mouth. The

others relaxed a bit seeing her so amused—perhaps there was a chance they could be civil to each other.

“Well, they had it coming,” she said. “And what about the castle? Have you grown accustomed to it yet? I’m sure it took some time getting used to it compared to that farmhouse you lived in before.”

“I still live at my farm, actually,” Little Bo said.

Red suddenly gagged as if she had swallowed a bug. “*Do* you?” she asked, trying her best to remain calm. “Then why did you ask me to move out of it?”

“Because I turned it into an orphanage,” Little Bo said with a snide smile.

Red sat incredibly still while her brain processed this. Then, as if her animalistic instincts had taken over her body, she lunged toward Little Bo with her fists raised in the air.

“I’m gonna kill her!” Red yelled.

Froggy had been preparing for this moment and immediately grabbed ahold of her before any damage was done. It took Bree and Emmerich’s help to keep her in her seat.

“You lousy piece of sheepherding trash! You did that on purpose! You knew giving my castle over to a bunch of brats would hurt me the most!”

“Red, how can you say that about orphans?” Bree scolded.

“Oh, don’t let the word fool you! I’ve met all of those delinquents myself and each one is more awful than the last! Most of their parents are alive and well—those kids were just too horrible for them to raise on their own,” Red said.

Little Bo didn’t deny the reasoning behind her actions. She just sat across from Red and smiled mischievously. Red eventually cooled off enough for the others to let her go. Emmerich decided to change the subject before anyone got hurt.

“What is your necklace?” Emmerich asked Little Bo.

No one had ever pointed it out before and Little Bo was surprised he’d noticed it. A chain so thin it was almost invisible rested around her neck and was tucked neatly away into the top of her dress. She pulled the necklace out and showed him the small heart-shaped rock hanging from it.

“It’s a stone heart,” she said.

“Why do you wear it?” Emmerich asked.

Little Bo didn’t know what to tell him since no one had ever asked before. “I lost someone I loved very much once,” she said. “I wear this necklace to remember them. In a strange way, it helps me from missing them too much.”

“Did they die or just *run away* from you?” Red remarked with a snort.

Little Bo didn’t respond. She played with the necklace in her hand and just smiled at the former queen. Her presence alone aggravated Red much more than anything she could say.

Things weren’t quite as lively in the first carriage but the passengers were starting to grow restless. Princess Hope was very agitated from being cooped up for so long and began to cry. Cinderella held her daughter tenderly in her arms and rocked her until she fell asleep. Sleeping Beauty admired her mothering skills as she sat across from her.

“You’re so good with her,” Sleeping Beauty said. “It makes me miss my own mother so much.”

“Me too,” Cinderella said. “There are so many times I wish my mother was still alive so I could ask her if I’m doing the right thing.”

“If a better mother existed in the world I certainly haven’t seen her,” King Chance told his wife. “And that includes our own mother.”

King Chase laughed at his brother. “Yes, our mother was a good person at heart but she was rather cold at times,” he said.

Sleeping Beauty smiled and then gazed out the window sadly. The subject of mothers had recently become a very sore one for her.

“Do you think if all the chaos ends—” Cinderella said but quickly corrected her choice of words. “*When* all this chaos ends, will the two of you want to start a family?”

Chase placed a comforting hand over Sleeping Beauty’s and she fought against the tears forming in her eyes. There was something they hadn’t shared with them yet.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—” Cinderella said, but she didn’t know what she was apologizing for.

“No, it’s quite all right,” Sleeping Beauty said. “Unfortunately, due to the effects of the sleeping curse, I and many women in our kingdom have been left unable to bear children.”

Cinderella and Chance were devastated to hear this. “Oh, my dear friend, I am so sorry,” Cinderella said, but there was nothing she could say

to comfort her.

Sleeping Beauty looked back out her window before their sympathetic faces awoke any more of her pain and frustration. “Some things are just not meant to be, I suppose,” she said.

The carriage became very quiet. The secret path curved across the border between the Northern and the Eastern Kingdoms and Sleeping Beauty recognized the landscape around them.

“We’re home,” she announced to her husband. “I would recognize these hills from miles away—”

Her voice faded and her mouth fell open. Something suddenly came into view in the distance that sent shivers down her spine. Before she could tell the others what she was seeing, she opened the window and stuck her head through it.

“Stop the carriages!” Sleeping Beauty yelled up at Jack and Goldilocks.

Jack and Goldilocks pulled on the reins and the carriages started to slow down but Sleeping Beauty had jumped out before they came to a complete stop. She ran straight toward what she had seen as fast as she could.

“Wait! Where’s the fire?” Jack called after.

“Where are you going?” Goldilocks asked. But the queen didn’t respond to either of them.

The others in the traveling party stepped out of their carriages to see what all the fuss was about. Once the royals saw Sleeping Beauty running in the distance, they sprinted after her but didn’t go very far. Sleeping Beauty stopped at the edge of a village no one else had seen and stared at it in horror.

The village had been viciously attacked. Most of it had been burned down but smoke still filled the air from parts of the village still ablaze. Not a living soul could be seen or heard. The damage was so severe all the kings and queens knew it must have been caused by the Grande Armée. Only their weapons could have left such an ugly mark on an innocent town.

“I don’t understand,” Sleeping Beauty said. “Why does my kingdom seem to suffer the most during times of crisis?”

Snow White stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. “The Eastern Kingdom may be the first to see the sun set, but it’s also the first to see the dawn,” she said.

Her comforting words were unheard as Sleeping Beauty was distracted

by a noise among the flames. It was a sound so faint she couldn't tell if she was actually hearing it or if her mind was playing a trick on her.

"Did you hear that?" Sleeping Beauty asked.

"Hear what?" Snow White asked.

"It sounded like *crying*," she said.

The others didn't hear anything. The sound came again and this time Sleeping Beauty bolted toward the village.

"Beauty, come back!" Chase called after his wife.

"It's too dangerous!" Cinderella said.

"Don't worry, we'll get her," Goldilocks said, and she and Jack ran after the queen.

Sleeping Beauty let the sound guide her; the closer she got, the louder it became. She pushed through the door of a crumbling and burned-out home and stepped inside. She had to cover her mouth from all the smoke in the air. The crying was so loud she knew it must be real.

Jack and Goldilocks found the queen and heard the noise themselves, as clear as day.

"What is that?" Goldilocks asked.

"It sounds like a *baby*," Jack said.

"Over here!" Sleeping Beauty called out.

A small chest was buried under a pile of debris that had fallen from the ceiling. Jack and Goldilocks helped Sleeping Beauty lift the rubble off the chest and open the lid. An infant girl had been hidden inside the chest and was surely the sole survivor of the Grande Armée's raid.

"I don't believe it," Goldilocks said in amazement.

"How did you hear her crying?" Jack asked.

Sleeping Beauty couldn't explain it, either. "I suppose I was meant to hear her," she said. She scooped her up into her arms and the crying infant went silent.

Goldilocks was eyeing the roof above them. "We need to get out of here fast."

The three of them ran out of the home with their new discovery just as the roof collapsed. Sleeping Beauty had saved the baby's life seconds before it would have been lost. They returned to their traveling party, which was still waiting at the edge of the village. They were all just as astonished to see the surviving infant.

“Whose baby is that?” Bree asked.

“As far as we know, she’s an orphan,” Sleeping Beauty said.

“Well, I know of a great castle you can send her to if you need an orphanage,” Red said, and gave Little Bo a dirty look.

Sleeping Beauty was smiling down at the baby she cradled with a warmth in her eyes the others had never seen. “I do, too,” she said. “She’s coming to live with us.”

Chase stepped toward his wife to talk sense into her, but once he saw the infant’s face he felt what his wife was feeling. The child had been *waiting* for them to save her.

“What about the royal bloodline?” Chandler asked what the rest of the group was thinking.

“If any of you are concerned with blood, I invite you to take a look around the village and see all the blood of my people that has been spilt,” Sleeping Beauty said. “This child is a survivor and a child of this kingdom and therefore a worthy heir to our throne.”

Although Cinderella and Chance were the only royals who knew Sleeping Beauty couldn’t have a child of her own, none of them objected. The child was a beacon of light in a very dark time—if she could survive the wrath of the Grande Armée, they could, too.

“What will you name her?” Cinderella asked.

Sleeping Beauty exchanged a smile with all the kings and queens around her and tears of joy came to her eyes. They all accepted the child of this spontaneous adoption as one of their own.

“Since she was found in the ashes of her village, I think I’ll name her Ash,” she said.

“Princess Ash of the Eastern Kingdom; it has a nice ring to it,” Froggy said.

“She’s beautiful,” Rapunzel said.

Red stared at the ransacked village and a heavy pile of guilt filled the pit of her stomach. All her anger and woes about losing her throne seemed so small in comparison to what the world was facing. This attack could have happened in *her kingdom*, and that thought angered her more than anything ever had.

Red marched up to Goldilocks. Everyone expected her to start an argument but she surprised all of them with a request.

“Teach us to fight,” Red said.

“Excuse me?” Goldilocks asked.

“I want to learn how to fight this army myself,” Red explained to the others. “This could have happened to any village in any of our kingdoms—this wasn’t an attack on the Eastern Kingdom, it was an attack on us all. I refuse to sit back and watch this Grande Armée destroy everything we love so much. If I die, I don’t want to die in a cozy carriage or throne room, I want to die fighting alongside our people.”

The royals all looked to one another as her words touched each of them. They were surprised, impressed, and, most important, *inspired* by what Red said. They all took a step toward Goldilocks, united in the request.

“I do have pretty decent upper-body strength from cleaning my stepmother’s house every day,” Cinderella bragged.

“And we *could* use a break from being cooped up inside those carriages.” Snow White shrugged.

Goldilocks was impressed by their interest and withdrew her sword from its scabbard. “All right, then,” she said. “Your Majesties, each of you please find a large stick. The first thing I’m going to teach you is how to use a sword.”

Mother Goose stood on the grand balcony of the Fairy Palace and gazed at the stars in the night sky. She quietly prayed that wherever the twins and Lester were, they were succeeding in their efforts to recruit the armies. But most of all, she prayed that they were safe.

Emerelda rushed onto the balcony. “Mother Goose,” she said breathlessly. “It’s the Fairy Godmother, she’s awake.”

Mother Goose’s spirits soared so high she almost floated into the air. “For good?” she asked.

“From the looks of it, I would say only momentarily,” Emerelda said. “She seems extremely tired and she’s asking for you.”

Without wasting a second, Emerelda and Mother Goose ran to the Fairy Godmother’s chambers. Mother Goose kneeled by her bedside and took her hand into her own. Her eyes were open but very heavy, as if she had just

awoken from a deep sleep and was about to fall into another.

“Hello there, my dear friend,” Mother Goose said softly to her.

“Emerelda, would you please give Mother Goose and me a moment alone?” the Fairy Godmother asked weakly.

Emerelda nodded and left the chambers.

“Mother Goose, I have something I need to ask of you before I go,” the Fairy Godmother said.

“Go? But where are you going?” Mother Goose laughed. “The Poconos? Martha’s Vineyard? Palm Springs?”

“You know where I’m going,” she said.

“I do,” Mother Goose said sadly. “But I was hoping there was still a chance you’d be sticking around. What is it that you need to ask me?”

The Fairy Godmother’s eyes grew heavier the more she tried to speak. “Over the years I have kept many secrets for you,” she said. “I’ve only asked you to keep one of mine, and I’m asking you to keep it even after I’m gone.”

Mother Goose knew what her friend was referring to without having to ask. “I assume you’re talking about the *other heir*,” she said.

“Yes,” the Fairy Godmother said with a deep breath. “If Alex hadn’t proven herself to be the *true heir of magic*, I wouldn’t be lying in this bed. Her compassion is both her greatest strength and her greatest weakness. If she ever knew there was another—if she ever found out who they are—she would be fooled the same way I was and it would destroy her.”

“I understand,” Mother Goose said. “You have my word: I will keep your secret and Alex will never know.”

The Fairy Godmother smiled at her oldest friend. “Thank you,” she said with relief. Her eyelids became too heavy to hold open and she drifted back into a very deep sleep. She slept even more peacefully than before, now that this had been addressed.

Mother Goose sighed and squeezed the Fairy Godmother’s hand. Keeping the Fairy Godmother’s secret would be the hardest challenge she would ever face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TO THE CORE

In the middle of the night three villages in the south of the Eastern Kingdom found themselves under attack. Soldiers of the Grande Armée invaded the towns and robbed the villagers of all their supplies. The villagers themselves were imprisoned and taken back to the soldiers' camp.

Only one village had the courage to stand up against the Armée and it was destroyed in the process. As far as the soldiers knew, not a single soul had survived the ruthless attack. When the enslaved villagers arrived at the camp, they were lined up and each given a shovel. Their only instructions were to dig.

"How far do they dig?" General Marquis asked the Masked Man. They watched the villagers work from the general's comfortable tent.

"Until they hit magma," the Masked Man said. He cradled the dragon egg in his hands and never let it out of his sight. "It shouldn't take them very long to reach it. During the Dragon Age the Eastern Kingdom was consumed with volcanoes. Dragons laid their eggs in the magma because their offspring grew at rapid rates in the heat."

"And what happens after the egg is placed in the magma?" the general asked with a sideways glance at him.

"I'll let you know," the Masked Man said, and held the egg even tighter. He was very tight-lipped, knowing his knowledge of dragons was the only thing keeping him alive.

"You're smarter than you look," the general said.

"General Marquis," Colonel Baton called from the back of the tent. "We have finalized our plan of attack for tomorrow."

The colonel and Capitaine De Lange were standing over the general's desk. A large map of the fairy-tale world had been spread out across it with several flags and figurines placed in strategic clumps throughout the kingdoms.

"Does the plan follow what we discussed?" the general asked him.

“Yes, sir,” the colonel said. “Tomorrow at dawn, we will strike the kingdoms and seize their capitals. Capitaine De Lange and his men have successfully spied on the kingdoms’ armies and we’re pleased to inform you our army of soldiers and recruits is more than twice the size of their armies put together.”

“Go on,” the general instructed.

“The ogres and one thousand soldiers will be sent to the Elf Empire to defeat their army—we didn’t obtain the exact number of the elves in the Elf Empire’s army, but we estimate it’s only a thousand or so. The witches and three hundred soldiers will be sent to the Corner Kingdom to defeat their small army of two hundred or so men. The goblins and one thousand soldiers will be sent to the Northern Kingdom to defeat their army of one thousand men. The fugitive animals and four hundred soldiers will be sent to the Red Riding Hood Kingdom to defeat their army of four hundred men. The trolls and five hundred soldiers will be sent to the Charming Kingdom to defeat their army of five hundred men. The remaining criminal recruits and eight hundred soldiers will be sent to the Eastern Kingdom to defeat their army of seven hundred or so men. The Troll and Goblin Territory is worthless to us—they have no authority in this world so we won’t waste our men on them.”

“We outnumber each of the armies, sir,” Capitaine De Lange said. “That will leave you two thousand soldiers to lead into the Fairy Kingdom and seize the Fairy Palace.”

“And a dragon!” the Masked Man reminded them. “You’ll have two thousand soldiers *and* a dragon.”

“How soon will the dragon be ready?” Baton asked.

“Raising dragons is all about timing,” the Masked Man told them. “Depending on the temperature of the magma and how much we feed it, it could grow to full size in a couple days—as long as you keep me around to properly raise it, that is.”

The general carefully looked over the map on his desk. The other commanders in his charge were practically claiming victory already based on the information they had, but the general wasn’t pleased. There was something about their strategy that didn’t sit well with him.

“Are you sure we haven’t miscounted the armies?” the general asked. “When the Brothers Grimm described each of the kingdoms to us, their

forces felt much bigger."

"My men returned only yesterday, shortly after you returned from the north, sir," Capitaine De Lange assured him. "The armies of the kingdoms have been seen preparing for war in the capitals and they were all accounted for."

The general still wasn't sold on the idea. He had a hunch they would need to charge the Fairy Palace with more than soldiers and a dragon if they wanted to succeed.

"Very well," the general said. "But I want more leverage than soldiers and a dragon before we strike the fairies. I want each of the rulers brought back alive once their kingdom is seized, is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Colonel Baton said. "We will attack the Fairy Kingdom last—once all the rulers of the other kingdoms have been successfully retrieved."

"Capitaine De Lange, make sure the villagers are digging as quickly as possible," the general ordered. "I want to put the egg in the magma no later than sunrise tomorrow."

Capitaine De Lange saluted and headed to the digging site. General Marquis rubbed his bald head, worrying there was information his men had missed. Lieutenant Rembert hurried inside with wide eyes and exciting news to tell the general.

"General Marquis, a discovery was made in one of the nearby villages. I thought you would like to see it, sir."

"What is it, Lieutenant?" the general asked as if it was impossible for anything to excite him.

"We've discovered a magic mirror, sir," the lieutenant said.

This sparked the general's interest. He knew magic mirrors held intuitive knowledge about the world. Perhaps the mirror could ease his doubts about the battle ahead. "Bring it in," he ordered.

The lieutenant left the tent and returned a moment later instructing two soldiers as they dragged something square and heavy inside. They propped it up in a corner of the tent and pulled off the protective sheet wrapped around it. The mirror had a thick golden frame with floral carvings and the purest glass any of them had seen.

The general walked toward it like he was approaching a poisonous snake. The Masked Man knew very well what kind of mirror it was but he didn't warn the general—he was much more interested to find out what the

general would see.

General Marquis stood in front of the mirror for a long moment and nothing happened. He waved his hand in front of it and nothing changed in the reflection.

“Idiot, you’ve been tricked,” he shouted at Rembert. “There is nothing magical about this mirror at all.”

Just as the general turned away, the other men in the tent gasped. The general’s reflection in the mirror had changed. Instead of a grown man wearing a uniform decorated with badges of honor, a weak little boy appeared. The boy was dreadfully skinny, filthy, and he trembled; he was a starving and scared peasant. His clothes were covered in holes and tears and he didn’t have any shoes. His left eye was swollen shut from a severe beating.

The general had spent his entire life trying to forget this boy but he knew who he was the instant he saw him.

“Lieutenant,” General Marquis said in a soft but threatening tone. “I want this mirror to be taken out of my tent at once and destroyed, and if you disturb me with garbage like this again, you’ll be next.”

Rembert and the other soldiers quickly removed the mirror from the general’s sight. Although he hadn’t even raised his voice, none of the men had ever seen the general so affected by something before. The general continued staring into the corner even though the mirror had been taken away.

“Colonel Baton,” the general said sharply. “I do not want to wait until dawn—send the armies out to the kingdoms as soon as they’re organized.”

“Yes, General,” Colonel Baton said. He left the tent, and the Masked Man and the general were alone.

“What kind of magic mirror was *that*?” General Marquis asked.

“It was a Mirror of Truth,” the Masked Man said. “It reflects who someone truly is rather than how they appear.”

The general became very quiet and very still.

“I assume you must have grown up very poor,” the Masked Man said. “I guess that explains where your drive comes from—a lifetime of having to prove yourself—”

The general jerked his head toward him. “Don’t you dare analyze me,” he barked. “You think you know me, but you don’t know the first thing

about me. You have no idea where I came from, what I came from, or what I had to do to become who I am today. That boy in the mirror is a reflection from the past and nothing more. He will never have to prove anything to anyone again."

The Masked Man knew better than to play with fire. "You're right, I don't know you," he said. "So please allow me to ask you this—a question I've had since we first met. Why conquer this world? Claiming a different dimension must seem a tad extreme even where you come from."

The general walked to his desk and pulled out a thick book he kept in the top drawer. He flipped through the book and the Masked Man could see the pages were filled with maps and portraits—it was a history book.

"Where I come from, each era is defined by the greatness of one man," he said. "Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, William the Conqueror, Genghis Khan… they were the greatest conquerors of their times. Soon a man named Napoleon Bonaparte will join that list of men… unless another man conquers something beyond Napoleon's wildest dreams."

"Ah, I see," the Masked Man said. "You're trying to outdo him. But surely you'll both be remembered as great contributors to the French Empire?"

General Marquis slammed the book shut and put it away in his desk. "Perhaps," the general said. "But there is only room for *one man* in the history books."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE ELF EMPIRE

Half of the Happily Ever After Assembly armies are in hiding while the other half stand guard over their kingdoms," Alex explained to the Troblin Army. "Once we've recruited the Elf Army, all the armies in hiding, as well as the ones left guarding the kingdoms, will unite and charge the Grande Armée together. Wait for my signal, and then join us in the Fairy Kingdom. Any questions?"

The Troblin Army consisted of a little more than eight hundred out-of-shape trolls and goblins, many of whom had recently joined, just out of boredom. They were seated in front of Alex in a wooden amphitheater that looked like a doughnut floating in the Great Troblin Lake.

Only one troll raised his hand with a question regarding Alex's explanation.

"Yes, *you* with the bone through your nose," Conner called on him. "What's your question?"

"If we join the armies of the Happily Ever After Assembly, what's in it for us?" the troll asked.

The troblin soldiers started exchanging whispers with one another. Alex hadn't mentioned anything they would get in return for helping them.

"What do you want?" Conner asked. "We could hook you up with some sheep or maybe some solid ground?"

"We want our freedom back!" a goblin in the back row yelled.

"Yeah! We want the right to leave our kingdom!" a troll in the front growled.

The entire Troblin Army agreed. *"Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!"* they chanted.

"Silence, troblins!" Queen Trollbella demanded. The amphitheater went quiet. "I am insulted you want to leave the water world I have built for you! Especially since we just recently gained our sea legs!"

A goblin in the center of the amphitheater leaned forward and vomited

all over the troll sitting in front of him.

"Well, *most* of us have gained our sea legs," Trollbella corrected herself.

Conner rolled his eyes at their request for freedom. "You were put here because you wouldn't stop enslaving people! My sister and I were enslaved not once but *twice* by you! Do you really expect us to grant you your freedom?"

Trollbella crossed her arms. "I'll never understand why humans take being enslaved so personally," she said. "What if my troblins promise to never enslave anyone again? Will you reconsider, Butterboy?"

Conner looked over at Alex. They didn't really have a choice—they needed the troblins.

"I guess," Conner said.

Queen Trollbella happily clapped her hands. "We'll give you a sacred troblin pinkie swear," she said. "Everyone raise your right hand, if you have one, and point your pinkie to the sky. Repeat after me: *I, Queen Trollbella __"*

"I, Queen Trollbella," the Troblin Army repeated.

"No, troblins, you're supposed to say your own name," she said, and they quickly made the correction. *"I promise to never kidnap, imprison, enslave, or forcefully borrow any human without their permission for as long as I live."*

The troblins reluctantly repeated after her, word for word.

"Wonderful," Trollbella said. "Good job, troblins, you may rest your pinkies. Is that good enough for you, Butterboy and fairy girl?"

The twins sighed. "It'll have to do," Alex said.

A goblin in the front raised his hand.

"Yes, *you* with the missing ear," Conner called on him.

"What will the signal be?" the goblin asked.

Everyone turned to Alex and waited for the answer, including Conner.

"Um… um… I'm not sure yet," Alex said. "But don't worry; you'll know it when you see it."

Trollbella raised an eyebrow at her. "Has anyone ever told you you're a little *too* confident?" she said.

By the time the Troblin Army was up to date on Alex's strategy the sun had set. Trollbella insisted they stay the night, and Alex and Conner were given a private area on the troll queen's floating fort to sleep on—which

consisted of the wooden floor and a blanket. Alex was worried if she made beds appear with her wand it would tip the whole fort over.

Besides the water rocking them and Trollbella spying on them every ten minutes, the twins had a difficult time sleeping because of all their worries.

"Conner, are you awake?" Alex whispered to her brother.

"Do you really have to ask?" he said. "What's on your mind?"

"I was just thinking about the Elf Empire," she said. "If the trolls wanted something in return for their help, I'm afraid the elves may ask for something in exchange, too."

"They'll probably just want a bunch of shoes," Conner said. "Aren't elves obsessed with shoes?"

"Gosh, I hope it's that easy," Alex said. "I'll have to think of something the empress wants so desperately she would be willing to give up her army for it."

"Good thing you're the next Fairy Godmother," Conner said. "It gives you a lot to work with."

The next morning the twins woke up with very sore backs from sleeping on the wooden floor. They said good-bye to Trollbella and climbed aboard Lester. He spread his wings and took off from the water and soared into the sky.

They flew northwest through the clouds toward the Elf Empire. The twins were reminded of their voyage on the *Granny* from up here. The world looked so peaceful and safe from above the clouds. They hoped that after meeting with the elves they would be one step closer to making the world below the clouds just as peaceful. After a few hours of flying, they arrived in the northwestern-most kingdom.

"Look, Conner!" Alex exclaimed. "There it is! That's the Elf Empire!"

"Whoa," Conner said. "Elves really do live in trees."

The entire empire was inside an enormous tree the size of a mountain. As the twins flew closer, they saw hundreds of homes built throughout the branches. Some were built on the tree like tree houses, some homes swung from the branches like birdhouses, and some were even built *into* the tree like squirrel nests.

The leaves were the size of the twins' bodies. It was as if they had shrunk and entered a miniature world. Lester carefully landed on a strong branch and the twins climbed off him. They walked along the branch, which

was like a street, to all the different homes and toward the center of the tree where they figured the empress must live.

“I really hope this giant tree doesn’t come with any giant bugs or birds,” Conner said, and quivered at the idea.

“Squaaa!” Lester squawked, offended by the remark.

“Not *you*, Lester, I’m talking about giant crows or spiders,” Conner said. “I don’t want to become something’s lunch.”

Lester suddenly looked terrified of the tree. He waddled much closer to the twins for protection.

“I don’t think we need to worry about that,” Alex said. “Look around, there’s *nothing* here.”

The twins searched the branches below, above, and ahead, but didn’t find anyone or anything. Every tree-home was vacant.

“They must have heard about the Grande Armée and left,” Conner said.

Defeated, Alex took a seat on one of the smaller branches. “But where did they go?” she asked. “How are we supposed to find them?”

Conner looked around the tree while he thought on it. “Well, a whole empire couldn’t have just uprooted and gone too far without someone noticing—” He froze. Before he could finish his thought, another one had interrupted.

“What is it?” Alex asked.

“Do you remember that time last year when you found me in the school library reading fairy tales?” Conner asked her.

“Maybe, why?”

“You said reading fairy tales was *returning to our roots*,” Conner said. “Then you went on to tell me that certain species of birds and insects hide in their tree’s roots when their home is being threatened. What if elves are one of those species?”

Alex got to her feet and started jumping up and down. “Conner, you’re a genius!” Alex said. “I bet the elves never left! I bet if we fly to the bottom of the tree, we’ll find the elves hiding!”

Conner started jumping up and down with his sister—he never missed an opportunity to celebrate his own cleverness. “I’m so glad I remembered that,” he said happily. “Because I gotta tell you, most of the stuff you say to me goes in one ear and out the—*AAAAH!*”

CRACK! The twins had been jumping on a weak part of the branch and

fell straight through it. To their surprise, the tree branch was hollow and they landed on a long wooden slide. The slide traveled through the branch and coiled down the giant tree trunk. The twins screamed and tried to grab ahold of anything they could but the slide was too slick, so they slid deeper and deeper into the bottom of the tree.

The slide finally ended and Alex and Conner piled on top of each other on the ground. The giant tree trunk was hollow and they found themselves in a secret chamber at the tree's base. Alex and Conner looked up and could see the slide was one of many that spiraled upward into the different branches of the tree. They had fallen into an escape route.

The twins were also startled to see that they were no longer alone. Thousands and thousands of elves were hiding at the bottom of the tree just like they had predicted and they were just as surprised to see them.

They were all short but very thin. Everything about them was pointed: They had pointed ears, pointed jaws, pointed shoes, and some even wore pointed cone hats. Their clothing was black and white and asymmetrical. They wore vests that buttoned sideways; their pant legs and sleeves were different lengths.

"What's up with their clothes?" Conner whispered to his sister.

"Don't you remember the story 'The Shoemaker and the Elves'?" Alex whispered back. "Elves are horrible at making their own clothes."

Upon their arrival the twins were instantly circled by a dozen elf soldiers. They pointed their wooden crossbows at them and Alex and Conner threw their hands up.

"What are you doing in our empire?" one of the elf soldiers asked.

"We don't mean any trouble!" Conner said.

"We've come to speak with your empress," Alex said.

The elves shoved their crossbows closer to them. "Who are you?" the soldier demanded.

"I'm Conner Bailey and this is my sister, Alex," Conner whimpered. He panicked. "My sister's a big deal—she's sort of the Fairy Godmother at the moment."

"Conner!"

"What else am I supposed to say? They're about to shoot us!"

"Liars!" the elf shouted.

Alex reached for her wand and with one *swoosh* magically turned all

their crossbows into bouquets of flowers. All the elves in the tree gasped and stepped back from her.

"She's a witch! She's come to grind our bones for her potions! Seize her!" the elf ordered. The soldiers lunged toward them and the twins braced themselves.

"STOP!" said a stern voice from the other side of the tree. All the elves quickly turned toward the direction it had come from. Across the secret chamber a female elf sat on a throne made of leaves.

"I'm guessing that's the empress," Conner said under his breath.

Empress Elvina was the largest elf in the room and when she stood from her throne she towered over everyone, including the twins—she was like a queen bee in a hive. She had a pointed jaw, pointed ears, large brown eyes, and very long earlobes. Her dark hair was wrapped in two buns on each side of her head and she wore a large headdress made of branches that stretched high and wide above her. The empress's gown was very tight and made entirely of sticks and twigs as if they had been individually glued to her lean body. She looked like a walking tree.

A fluffy but massive red squirrel was perched at the side of her throne like an overgrown dog. The empress slowly sauntered toward the twins and the elves parted as she moved through them.

"If she says she's the Fairy Godmother, then let her prove it," the empress challenged. She was exactly like Mother Goose had described, very beautiful on the outside but the twins could tell there was much more behind her intimidating eyes.

Alex didn't know what to do. She may have been a girl with a wand, but how was she going to convince the elves that she was legitimately acting as the Fairy Godmother?

A loud squawking echoed from above them. The entire empire looked up and saw Lester sliding down into the base of the tree. He was flapping his wings madly but was sliding too fast to stop. He plopped on the ground beside Alex and Conner, beak first. He greatly regretted his decision to follow the twins into the tree.

"We have a giant goose; does that help our case?" Conner asked with a nervous laugh. He meant it as a joke but the empress was taken by the large gander.

"I recognize this bird," she said. "He belongs to Mother Goose."

“Mother Goose is a friend of ours,” Alex said. “She loaned us her goose so we could travel here safely to speak with you. I’m the Fairy Godmother’s granddaughter, and since she’s ill at the moment, I’m filling in for her.”

Empress Elvina’s eyes darted back and forth between the twins. Perhaps they were telling the truth after all.

“I hope you realize being the Fairy Godmother means nothing here. The Happily Ever After Assembly has no power or authority in my empire,” she said.

“Yes, we understand,” Alex said. “We’ve come here to warn you about an army that has invaded our world and plans to start a war—”

“We’ve heard about this Armée,” the empress said. “That is why we have taken refuge inside our tree and we will stay here until the Armée is gone.”

Conner took a step toward her. “But they won’t go away unless we fight them together,” he said. “The Happily Ever After Assembly needs the help of your army to defeat them. The fairies and humans can’t do it alone.”

An angry murmur broke out among the elves. The twins could see how outraged the empress was to hear this, but instead of getting angry, Elvina batted her eyelashes and a smile came to her face.

“Help?” She laughed. “You want our *help*? Did everyone hear that? The fairies have sent children to ask us for our help.”

Only a few of the elves laughed with her. The rest of the chamber glared at Alex and Conner. They weren’t making any friends.

“Look, Empress Tree Lady,” Conner said. “We understand you’re still upset that the elves weren’t included in the Happily Ever After Assembly, but if we don’t work together, the Grande Armée will destroy us all—”

“My dear boy,” the empress said, and all the amusement faded from her face. “Is that what they told you—that we were upset because we weren’t invited to join their little fairy club? Well, if so, it appears they’ve re-written history.”

Alex and Conner exchanged a concerned look. “Then what else are you mad about?” Conner asked.

The empress knew their ignorance wasn’t their fault and decided to educate them.

“The elves were tormented by dragons during the Dragon Age just as much as any other race,” she explained. “Our ancestors helped the fairies

defeat the dragons. Once the dragons were gone and the world entered the peaceful era of the Age of Magic, the fairies forgot everything we had done for them. They divided the world up among the surviving species. The humans were given several vast kingdoms but the elves were given only a tiny unlivable piece of land isolated from everyone else. We had been ostracized just as much as the trolls and goblins, but for no reason other than not being human."

The twins had never heard about this before. They'd always assumed the elves lived in the far northwest because they wanted to.

"When the elves objected to our assigned home, the fairies ignored us, and because the elves questioned them we weren't invited to join the Happily Ever After Assembly," Empress Elvina continued. "The northwest was full of predators that hunted elves, and witches that picked our bodies apart for potions, but the elves had no choice but to live here. Our ancestors grew this giant tree and built this empire high in its branches, far away from the dangers. And we've been here ever since."

Alex and Conner didn't know what to say. Could they apologize for something that happened so long ago?

"Well, you guys really screwed us over last year when you surrendered to the Enchantress!" Conner said, and folded his arms. "So I think we're even."

"Why were we expected to clean up a mess we didn't create?" the empress asked. "There is no difference between the Enchantress and this army—they're both your problems. The humans and fairies want to choose which issues the elves are involved in based on what's convenient for them __"

Alex interrupted her before the situation became worse. "Your Majesty, every nation will always remember history differently, and that's just how it is," she said. "We all live in the same world and it won't do anyone any good if we continue to play this game of *who was the bigger jerk* for eternity. Right now, more than ever, this world needs to stand united against a force that threatens us all. We weren't expecting you to cooperate just because we asked you to, so I'm willing to offer you something in return if you help us fight the Grande Armée."

"And what is that?" the empress asked mockingly.

"Yeah, what is that?" Conner asked, just as curious.

Alex knew she was going to regret making this offer for the rest of her life but they were running out of time. “Once this Armée is destroyed with the help of the elves, as the new Fairy Godmother I will abolish the Happily Ever After Assembly,” she declared.

The entire chamber was astonished to hear this come from her mouth.

“What?” Conner shrieked.

“What did you just say?” the empress asked.

“You heard me,” Alex said. “The Happily Ever After Assembly is unfair, it’s exclusive, and it has proven to be inefficient in times of crisis. This world needs to march into the future *together.* So I’m inviting you to help me build a fresh and more inclusive assembly. Join me in creating the Happily Forever After Assembly.”

This was shocking news to everyone in the room—especially to Alex. She had never dreamed of starting a new assembly to unite the fairy-tale world, but she knew the idea of one would be the only way to get the elf empress’s attention.

The empress sauntered even closer to the twins. The whole empire was on pins and needles waiting to hear her answer.

“If the elves join this new assembly, I want to lead it,” Empress Elvina said.

“You should have stuck with shoes, Alex!” Conner said. He slapped his palm against his forehead.

“The new assembly won’t have a *leader*,” Alex said. “But you can manage it *with* me. The assembly will look to the Fairy Godmother and the empress of the elves for guidance and we will advise them *together*.”

Alex offered her hand to the empress. Elvina sneered down at it; she had never trusted a human before, but she knew Alex was a woman of her word. Empress Elvina shook Alex’s hand and the deal was made. There was no going back now.

“My army is at your disposal, Fairy Godmother,” the empress said with a small bow.

“Terrific,” Alex said. She looked over at her brother, who sighed with as much relief as she did. Now that the elves were on their side, they could actually win this war.

“Now I want the Elf Army to follow me into the Fairy Kingdom immediately,” Alex said. “I’ll signal the other armies throughout the

kingdoms to join us and we'll strike the Grande Armée before they—"

A deafening noise filled the giant tree as it was hit with a cannonball that blew part of the tree trunk to bits. The twins and the elves hit the ground, and sunlight filled the dark chamber, pouring in from the enormous hole that had just been created. They were too late—the Grande Armée had started their attack.

Another thunderous sound erupted as another cannonball hit the tree, followed by another and another.

"What's happening?" the elf empress screamed.

"It's the Grande Armée!" Conner yelled. "They're here! The Elf Empire is under attack!"

The elves started to panic and ran around the tree in hysterics.

"Everyone remain calm!" Elvina shouted. "I want everyone to climb to safety at once! Our army will stay behind and fight these invaders!"

Alex looked to her brother like a deer in headlights—in a matter of seconds their entire plan had gone astray.

"Conner, what do we do now?" Alex asked. "We need the elves to go with us so we can strike the Armée as a whole!"

"We have to get out of here and come up with a new plan, then!" Conner said. "If the Armée is attacking, I doubt the elves are the only ones they're targeting!"

"But the elves!" Alex pleaded. "We need them if we want to win!"

"We don't have a choice! We need to leave now!"

Conner grabbed Lester's reins and forced his sister onto the large bird. He climbed on the goose's back himself and they flew higher into the hollow tree. A cannon blasted a hole through the trunk near the top and Conner steered Lester through it and outside the giant tree.

The twins could see a thousand soldiers and hundreds of ogres surrounding the Elf Empire's tree. The soldiers re-directed their cannons toward Lester and the twins as soon as they were spotted emerging from the tree. The ogres grabbed boulders from the ground and threw them at the goose along with the cannonballs.

Lester squawked in terror as he narrowly dodged the cannonballs and boulders jetting toward him. He flew as fast as he could away from the Elf Empire's tree. They created a distraction as the Elf Army began firing their crossbows at the soldiers from inside the tree. The citizens of the Elf

Empire also began dropping giant acorns and twigs on the Grande Armée from the branches above them.

Just when the twins thought they had flown out of the cannons' reach, a rogue cannonball bolted through the sky and blasted through Lester's right wing. The gander squawked in pain and he and the twins began rapidly descending toward the trees on the horizon. Lester flapped his left wing as hard as he could but it wasn't enough to keep them in the sky.

They crashed hard onto the forest ground. The twins were thrown off Lester's back and into separate directions through the trees. Conner hit a tree and then landed in a large shrub underneath it. Alex skidded across a grassy field and heard a crunch underneath her. When she came to a stop she reached for her wand but it had snapped into several pieces in her pocket.

Alex and Conner were too wounded to get to their feet. They both had broken several bones in their bodies from the crash. They heard Lester squawking in the distance—he was perhaps in even more pain than they were. They heard the attack on the Elf Empire continuing in the distance but there was nothing they could do. They looked at the trees around them and wondered where they had landed but their vision faded away as they both slowly lost consciousness.

The war had begun.

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE FORGOTTEN ARMY

The Grande Armée's divided troops spread out across the fairy-tale world to attack the kingdoms they had been assigned. Hundreds of Armée soldiers and trolls crossed into the Charming Kingdom preparing to take the capital by storm.

Xanthous hovered in the air high above the spirals of the Charming Palace clock tower and saw the soldiers marching in the distance. The moment they had feared the most had come—the Charming Kingdom was facing its first attack and its defenses were outnumbered. Xanthous pointed his finger into the air and a fiery flare shot from it. It signaled Sir Lampton and his men below and they quickly assembled on the front lawns of the Charming Palace.

"How many are there?" Sir Lampton asked Xanthous as he descended to the lawns.

"They outnumber us by a few hundred trolls," the fairy said. "The stakes are high but it could be much worse."

"We must signal the other half of our army to come out of hiding," Sir Lampton said. "If they only outnumber us by trolls, we could win this battle! Not as many of my men will have to lose their lives today."

"Lampton, we can't," Xanthous said. "We have to fight the Armée off with the men we have while we wait for the signal. Trust me, this is only the first battle we'll face and if we use all our forces now, there may be no one left to fight the horrors of tomorrow."

Sir Lampton's face grew serious and he stepped closer to him. "How am I supposed to tell these men they're about to die in battle while their brothers stay in hiding?"

"We may not win this battle but if we want to win the war we have to follow the plan," Xanthous said.

Sir Lampton reluctantly nodded. "God, I hope that little girl's plan works," he said to himself.

“Me too, sir,” Xanthous said. “I don’t want to think about what the world will look like if we fail.”

Sir Lampton mounted his horse and rode it through the lines of Charming soldiers. “My good men,” he shouted. “The enemy has arrived in our beautiful home sooner than we expected. We may be outnumbered by soldiers and by trolls, but they can never outmatch us in heart, in courage, or in love for our country!” Lampton withdrew his sword and raised it high above his head. “Let’s be the first ones to show these monsters that the Charming Kingdom is not for sale! Let’s give them a taste of the Charming Army so they cower in fear when our brothers return from hiding to finish them off!”

The Charming soldiers all raised their swords with him. They cheered Lampton’s words even though they knew the odds of surviving this battle were against them. Like true soldiers, they turned their fear into bravery and courageously faced the oncoming threat to protect the country they loved.

“But we’re not outnumbered!” a voice called out from behind the soldiers.

Lampton and his soldiers turned toward the voice and they saw it wasn’t alone. Slowly emerging from behind the Charming Palace and from the streets surrounding the capital were hundreds and hundreds of civilians. The men and women carried pots and pans, pitchforks and hoes, rolling pins and knives, scissors and shears, mops and buckets. They were bakers and farmers, locksmiths and seamstresses, teachers and butchers, maids and butlers—and they all had come to stand proudly with the soldiers of their kingdom.

“What’s going on?” Xanthous asked the civilians.

“We’ve come to join the fight!” a farmer declared, and all the men and women of his party cheered.

“This is our home, too!” a seamstress yelled.

“We won’t let our kingdom fall into the hands of anyone else but our king and queen,” a butcher shouted.

Their enthusiasm befuddled the soldiers. In his entire military career, Sir Lampton had never seen anything like this before. The Charming citizens were perhaps more eager to fight the Armée than the soldiers were.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Lampton shouted, gesturing for them to quiet down. “We respect your intentions, but this is a matter for the Charming

Army and we morally cannot ask this of you!”

A maid dramatically looked around at her crowd of servants. “*Asked?* Was anyone here *asked* to fight for this kingdom?” she said. “I don’t have to be *asked*—I’m here of my own accord because I want to protect my home and I’m not leaving until the Armée is gone!”

The civilians burst into a thunderous roar. Their enthusiasm was unyielding. Nothing Lampton said or did was going to convince them to leave.

Xanthous looked at Lampton and shrugged. “It won’t hurt to have more numbers,” he said.

Sir Lampton gazed around at the willing crowd. His army had almost doubled right before his eyes. It was a sight that warmed him to the center of his heart. The people he had spent his entire life loyally protecting had come to *his* aid. They cared about their kingdom’s prosperity as much as he did.

Lampton raised his sword to the bigger and stronger army now surrounding him. “Then let us fight these invaders together and show them what the Charming Army *and* the Charming Kingdom are made of!” he declared.

The soldiers of the Charming Army raised their swords, their brooms, their rakes, their hammers, their rolling pins, their knitting needles, and whatever other objects they had brought with them for battle. They cheered so loudly together the sound was heard miles away and the soldiers and trolls of the approaching Armée quivered in their boots.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE HEALING FLAMES OF HAGETTA'S FIRE

Conner wasn't expecting to wake up. When Lester crashed into the forest, he figured it was *the end*. He hoped that the Happily Ever After Assembly could win the war without them, and if they did, he hoped he and his sister would be remembered as war heroes. The last image in his head as he slowly lost consciousness was the statue they would erect in his honor. The statue was much taller and more muscular than he was in real life and the sculptor had added a cleft in his chin—it was exactly how Conner wanted to be remembered.

But to Conner's surprise—*he woke up*. His eyelids slowly opened and his blurry vision took a moment to adjust. He was lying on a cot in a small and cluttered cottage. A large wooden table and an iron cauldron were in the center of the cottage and a thick stack of mirrors had been placed between them. The walls were filled from floor to ceiling with shelves of jars: jars of dirt, sand, plants, flowers, colorful liquids, insects, small reptiles, and pieces of bigger animals, like pig ears and cow hooves. A small fire of peach-colored flames burned in a tiny brick fireplace.

"Where am I?" he asked himself. He felt a tingling on the side of his torso and looked down to see his entire left side was engulfed in the same peach-colored flames. *"AHHH! I'm on fire! I'm on fire!"*

Conner screamed and looked around the cottage for something to extinguish them. He didn't see anything and beat the flames with his sleeves. He figured his whole body was in shock since he didn't feel any pain.

A woman appeared from another room in the cottage and rushed to Conner's side.

"Calm down," the woman said, and grabbed his hands. "You're doing more damage than the fire is," she said. The woman was middle-aged and wore dark red robes. Her hair was the same color as her robes and she had bright green eyes.

“What’s happening to me?” Conner yelled.

“You broke your ribs in the fall,” the woman said. “The fire is healing you.”

“The fire is *healing me*?” he asked.

The woman walked to the fireplace. “It’s a magic fire. Look,” she said, and held her hand over the flames. They flickered around her hand but didn’t burn her. “See? Are you satisfied?”

Conner stopped panicking but he was anything but relaxed. Seeing his body covered in flames was incredibly unsettling, however helpful they were.

“Did you see us crash?” Conner asked the woman.

“Yes,” the woman said. “You were all hurt pretty bad. I brought you back here to heal your wounds before they got worse. You’re in the Dwarf Forests, but don’t worry, you’re safe in my cottage.”

“Where’s my sister? Is she all right?” Conner asked.

“She’s banged up worse than you but she’s coming around,” the woman said.

The woman moved her cauldron out of the way so Conner could see his sister resting peacefully on a cot behind it. Alex’s leg and wrist were covered in flames healing her broken bones.

“Who are you?” Conner asked. “Are you a witch?”

“My name is Hagetta,” the woman said. “I prefer the term *healer* these days, but yes, I’m a witch.”

Her name instantly rang a bell. “Hagetta?” he repeated. “Any relation to the witch named Hagatha?”

Hagetta nodded. “She was my much older sister,” she said. “Hagatha taught me everything I know about witchcraft. But I was never interested in dark magic like she was, so we parted ways shortly before she died.”

Alex stirred to life and slowly sat up. She looked around the cottage as her eyes adjusted. “Where am I?”

“You’re safe, dear,” Hagetta said.

“Hey, Alex, heads-up—you’re also on fire! But don’t worry, it’s helping your leg and wrist heal,” Conner warned her.

Alex’s eyes grew twice in size as she saw the flames engulfing her wrist and leg. *“Okay,”* she peeped. Nothing could make her entirely comfortable with this. “Sooo… what kind of fire am I on exactly?”

“They’re healing flames from the breath of an albino dragon,” Hagetta explained. “The albino dragons were very rare and just as awful as regular dragons, but their flames had unique healing qualities. My great-great-great-great-grandmother acquired some of those flames during the Dragon Age and my family has kept them burning from generation to generation.”

“Wow,” Conner said. “I can’t even keep a Chia Pet alive.”

Alex became less anxious knowing this information but she was still uneasy from waking up in the strange cottage. She couldn’t stop staring at Hagetta—she could have sworn their paths had crossed in the past.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” she asked.

“Her name is Hagetta and she’s Hagatha’s younger sister.” Conner filled her in.

Alex was shocked. “You’re *Hagatha’s* sister?”

“I am,” Hagetta said. “But I believe we saw each other at Jack and Goldilocks’s wedding.”

“You’re right!” Alex said, putting the pieces together. “How do you know Jack and Goldilocks?”

Hagetta laughed at the thought. “I’ve known Goldilocks since she was a very little girl and started her life on the run. We first met when I caught her trying to rob me. I scared her off and thought I’d never see her again, but then a few weeks later I found her in the woods—she had been attacked by some creature and barely survived. I brought her back here and healed her wounds but she refused to stay any longer. She insisted she didn’t need my help and told me she could take care of herself. I knew she was too stubborn to convince, so I gave Goldilocks her first sword. I told her she would have to learn to defend herself if she was going to live on her own.”

“You gave Goldilocks her first sword?” Conner asked, tickled pink by the story. “That’s like giving Shakespeare his first pen!”

Hagetta smiled. “She returned the favor a few years later. A gang of trolls cornered me in the woods and tried to enslave me. Goldilocks heard my pleas for help and she came out of nowhere on that horse of hers.”

“Wow, talk about karma,” Conner said.

“Indeed,” Hagetta said. “And since then, I’ve tried to assist anyone I met who needs a helping hand. I never thought a wanted fugitive would teach me the power of a clean conscience.”

“We can’t thank you enough for helping us,” Conner said, then quickly

looked around the room. “Wait, where’s Lester?”

The twins heard a *squawk* as Lester drowsily popped his head up from under Hagetta’s table. Flames covered his busted beak and his left wing was ablaze as the peach-colored fire slowly re-grew his wing one feather at a time.

“That is the most stubborn gander I have ever met,” Hagetta said. “He wouldn’t let me touch you when I first found you—it was like he was protecting his own chicks. I told him I only meant to help but still had to sedate him with a sleeping potion to calm him down. It should be out of his system by now.”

Conner made an affectionate frown and rubbed the giant goose’s neck. “Thanks for looking out for us, bud,” he said. “Mother Goose will be very happy to hear that.”

Alex searched her dress pockets and suddenly gasped. “Oh no,” she said. “My wand broke and the pieces must have fallen out of my pocket!”

“No worries, child, your wand will be back to normal soon,” Hagetta said. She pointed to the fireplace and Alex saw her crystal wand had been placed directly on the firewood and the flames were slowly mending it.

Alex was so relieved she laid back down and almost forgot she was on fire herself.

“You’re the nicest witch we’ve ever met,” Conner said. “I thought all witches were terrible, but you’ve proven me wrong.”

“All it takes is one bad apple to disgrace a whole tree,” Hagetta said. “I come from a very long line of witches and I’ve only ever heard of *one* witch who eats children—but thanks to the story ‘Hansel and Gretel,’ the whole world thinks *all of us* live in gingerbread houses and lure innocent youths to their deaths.”

“That’s an interesting point,” Conner said. “I’ve met just as many ugly humans as I have ugly witches but *we’re* not stereotyped.”

“Most witches don’t start out as ugly,” Hagetta said. “Dark magic leaves its mark on its dealers. My sister Hagatha was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Men traveled across kingdoms to woo and court her. But after devoting her life to harmful witchcraft, its effects began to show on her face.”

Alex sat straight up. “Wait a second, how long have we been here?” she asked.

“A few hours,” Hagetta said.

“Oh no,” Alex said. “Conner, we’ve got to get back to the Fairy Palace at once! Now that the Grande Armée has started attacking we have to form a new plan!” She made the mistake of stepping on her bad foot and yelped in pain before falling back onto the cot.

“You two are no good to anyone in the condition you’re in,” Hagetta said. “Wait for the flames to finish doing their job. Once they burn out, you’ll be healed.”

As much as it killed her to sit still at a time like this, Alex had no choice. Their plan had been compromised, and she slumped as if they had already lost the war.

“It was really smart of you to keep half of the armies hidden, Alex,” Conner said. “At least no one was unprepared for this to happen. As soon as we get back to the Fairy Palace we’ll find out who has and hasn’t been attacked—maybe our first plan can still work.”

“I’m not sad because of our plan,” Alex said. “You saw how viciously they opened fire on the Elf Empire. There’s no way the Corner Kingdom or the Bo Peep Republic stands a chance against forces like that—”

Hagetta couldn’t help but interrupt. “Did you just say ‘Bo Peep Republic’?” she asked. “What on earth is that?”

“It’s the new name of the Red Riding Hood Kingdom,” Conner said. “They changed the name because Little Bo Peep was elected queen.”

Hagetta raised both of her eyebrows and looked off into space, completely flabbergasted. “Was she now?” she asked.

“Do you know Little Bo Peep?” Alex asked.

It was obvious from her expression that they were acquainted. “Very well, I’m afraid.”

“How do you know her?” Conner asked.

“She sought me out when she was a little girl,” Hagetta explained. “Apparently she dozed off one afternoon on her farm and lost track of her sheep. The whole thing was a great embarrassment for her so she found me in the woods and paid me five gold coins to make her a potion that would keep her awake.”

“Did you make her the potion?” Conner asked.

“I did,” Hagetta said. “And it was one of the biggest mistakes I ever made.”

“Was something wrong with the potion you gave her?” Alex asked.

“No, there was just a lot wrong with the customer,” Hagetta said. “The potion worked so well that Little Bo came back to me many times, expecting fixes for all of her problems throughout the years. She needed a potion for her sheep to grow the fluffiest wool, she needed a potion for her cows to give the sweetest milk, she wanted seeds to make her chickens lay the biggest eggs—it never stopped! Especially when *that man* came into the picture.”

The twins looked at each other, equally intrigued.

“Which man?” Conner asked.

“The man Little Bo fell madly in love with,” Hagetta said. “He was older than she was and a total crook.”

“Are you talking about the man trapped inside her magic mirror?” Alex asked. Her curiosity had completely taken over her body and she couldn’t help asking.

Conner and Hagetta both stared at her. Conner had no idea what she was talking about but Hagetta was astonished she knew anything about it.

“How did you know about the magic mirror?” Hagetta asked.

“What magic mirror?” Conner asked, hoping one of them would fill him in.

Alex hesitated as she tried to make the explanation as harmless for herself as possible. “During the election a friend and I thought it would be fun to spy on Little Bo,” Alex said. “We weren’t looking to cause any trouble, just to have some fun, but we saw a magic mirror inside her barn and there was a man trapped inside it.”

Conner raised a suspicious eyebrow. “Is this the same friend you’re *not dating*?”

Alex didn’t respond. All her attention was on Hagetta.

“The magic mirror in Little Bo’s possession is a mirror of communication, not of imprisonment,” Hagetta said. “I should know—I made it for her. The man you saw wasn’t trapped in the mirror; he was locked away in prison many years ago. I gave them each a mirror so they could still communicate.”

Alex covered her mouth. It had never occurred to her that the mirror in Little Bo’s barn might be a communication mirror like the kind she and her brother had.

“Wait a second,” Conner said, making connections of his own. “There was a mirror in one of the cells in Pinocchio Prison! Is Little Bo Peep in love with *the Masked Man*?”

“She never told me his real name but yes, that is the name he chose for himself,” Hagetta said. “He was the youngest son in a very powerful family—but he longed to be more powerful than all of them. He tried everything he possibly could to gain the control he desired; he lied and stole, he made promises he couldn’t keep, and bargained deals he couldn’t afford. He’s the most conniving type of man there is.”

Alex nodded as everything began making sense to her. “Little Bo wanted to be queen because she thought being the ruler of a kingdom would give her the authority to free him from prison.”

Hagetta grunted. “I’m sure she also couldn’t live with the guilt,” she said. “Little Bo is the reason he was caught in the first place—*she turned him in.*”

Conner gasped. “She turned in the man she loved?”

“He may have cast a spell on Little Bo’s innocent heart, but even she couldn’t deny how dangerous he was. She warned me about him just as many times as she confessed her undying love. She betrayed him because Little Bo was protecting someone *else* she loved,” Hagetta explained. “Little Bo and the Masked Man had a *child.*”

Both the twins shook their heads in disbelief. “Little Bo is a mother?” Conner asked.

“She was,” Hagetta said. “Little Bo was terrified of what the Masked Man would do if he found out she was carrying his child. He was so obsessed with power she was afraid he would see an heir as a threat. So she wrote an anonymous letter to the Fairy Palace warning them of his plans to steal from the Fairy Godmother, and he was caught in the act. Little Bo gave birth to a son while he was locked up and he never knew about the baby or the betrayal.”

“What happened to the baby?” Alex asked.

Hagetta sighed and shook her head. “Little Bo came here while she was in labor and delivered the child right in this room,” she said. “She begged me to take the child somewhere the Masked Man could never find him. She was so young at the time I couldn’t argue that the child should be raised by someone else. So I took him to a place I will never reveal for as long as I

live, so his father will never find him. It broke Little Bo's heart to be separated from the child and the Masked Man. I tried soothing her with the healing flame, but even the flames of an albino dragon can't fix a broken heart."

"Did you do anything else to help her?" Conner asked.

"I did," Hagetta said. "And it was the only time I ever performed dark magic. I followed a spell I saw my sister perform on a lovesick maiden a long time ago. I cut out a small piece of Little Bo's heart, the part that was full of hurt and longing for the men in her life, and I turned it into stone. The maiden my sister used the enchantment on turned into a soulless monster, and I wanted better for Little Bo, so I gave Little Bo the piece of her heart on a chain and told her to wear it when she was ready to face the loss that comes with love. For her sake, I hope he stays in prison for the rest of his life."

It was a tragic story and it made Alex even more nervous about the chapter of the story they were still in.

"Hagetta, the Masked Man was recruited by the Grande Armée," Alex said. "He promised the general he could take them to a dragon egg. We were told it was impossible, but if he is as powerful as you say, do you think he actually knows where to obtain one?"

Hagetta went very quiet and her face became still. Horrific images flashed behind her eyes that she didn't share with the twins.

"I pray he doesn't," Hagetta said. "The fairies were successful in ridding the world of dragons, but there have always been rumors that there were one or two eggs left behind. No one would know how to kill a dragon anymore if one should arise—all those fairies are either dead or too old to slay a dragon now. If the Masked Man were to get his hands on a dragon egg, it wouldn't matter what kind of plan you formed, the world would be over."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

FEEDING THE CREATURE

The villagers dug so deep into the earth they created a canyon beside the Grande Armée's camp. A villager by the name of Farmer Robins had the misfortune of being the first to uncover the magma below the dirt. As soon as his shovel broke the ground, the lava gushed out and burned his hands. He screamed and fell to the ground in agony.

Although Rook had been warned to leave the south of the Eastern Kingdom, by the time he convinced his father that they should take Alex's advice, the Grande Armée had occupied their farm and the villages nearby. Rook and his father were taken captive and brought to the camp to dig along with the other imprisoned villagers.

"Father!" Rook cried, and rushed to his father's side.

Lava rapidly filled the canyon and the villagers frantically climbed out of it to safety. Rook and another man hoisted Farmer Robins onto their shoulders and helped him up out of the canyon just as its base filled with lava. The lava was so hot the abandoned shovels caught on fire before it even touched them.

General Marquis peered through his tent at the commotion and a small smile appeared on his face. He knew it was time to hatch the dragon egg.

The villagers were gathered in a group at the side of the canyon by the soldiers who observed them. They panted and sweated profusely from their quick climb. Rook held his father's head in his lap; he was moaning in pain from his burns. He needed help but as Rook looked around the camp he realized there was no one there who could help his father. He had to figure out a way to escape the camp as soon as possible.

A few moments later General Marquis and Colonel Baton stood over the edge of the canyon looking down at the orange lava at the very bottom. The Masked Man was sent into the canyon to place the dragon egg in the lava and the commanders waited impatiently for him to return. Finally, they saw his covered face appear as the Masked Man crawled up the canyon wall.

“Oh boy, we’ve got a lively one!” he happily shouted up at the commanders. Parts of his tattered clothing had been burned off and the edges of his mask were smoky. Apparently the hatching process hadn’t been seamless.

“Did the egg hatch?” the general asked.

“Yes, it did!” the Masked Man said. “Congratulations, General, it’s a boy! And he’s a feisty lad! He nearly scorched me to death with his first breaths alone.”

The Masked Man surfaced and reached out a hand for them to help him up but the general and the colonel didn’t offer him any assistance. He pulled himself out of the ground and onto his feet and brushed all the dirt and ash from his clothes.

“And now what do we do?” the general asked.

“We feed him,” the Masked Man said. “He’s napping in the lava right now but he’s going to be very hungry in a few minutes. The key is to keep as much food down there as possible. As soon as he runs out he’ll climb up here to hunt, and we don’t want him to do that until he’s grown. Dragons are most aggressive when they first emerge from their nests, and we want him to save that energy for when he attacks the fairies.”

The general grunted after learning he would have to wait even longer. The Masked Man continued to test his patience more than any battle ever had. “What does it eat?” the general asked.

“Meat,” the Masked Man said as if it were obvious.

The general eyed the Masked Man peculiarly, hoping this might offer a chance to finally get rid of him.

“Don’t look at me,” the Masked Man said. “I’m nothing but skin and bone—he’s going to need protein to build his strength. Besides, once he emerges, you’ll still need me to show you how to declare dominance over him.”

“Lieutenant Rembert?” General Marquis ordered.

Rembert was among the soldiers keeping watch over the villagers and stepped forward. “Yes, sir?” he asked.

“Round up all the livestock we took from the villagers and bring them to the edge of the canyon,” the general said. “Gradually push the animals into the canyon as the Masked Man instructs.”

“Yes, sir,” Rembert said. “And what do you want us to do with the

villagers now?”

General Marquis snuck a menacing glance at their captives. “Keep them alive for the time being,” he said. “We may need more food for the dragon later.”

Although the villagers couldn’t hear the general, it was obvious what he was plotting with the lieutenant. They whispered frantically among themselves and the families held each other a little tighter than before. Rook looked around the camp, trying to think of something—*anything*—to save his father and the other villagers from this nightmare.

A repetitive and turbulent vibration moved through the ground as a galloping horse traveled toward the camp. The soldiers and the villagers looked into the forest and saw Capitaine De Lange charging toward them on his horse, returning from battle. He was in a frenzy and covered a wounded arm. He jumped off his horse and ran up to General Marquis.

“General Marquis! General Marquis!” the captain cried.

The general was anything but pleased to see him. “Why are you not leading the battalion in the Charming Kingdom, Capitaine De Lange? Have you led your men to a victory already?”

De Lange fell to his knees and stared up beseechingly at him. “Sir, my battalion did everything we could, but we were outnumbered!” he told him.

“WHAT?” the general shouted.

“Outnumbered?” Baton shouted as well. “But that is impossible! We sent more than enough trolls and soldiers into the Charming Kingdom!”

Capitaine De Lange began sobbing at the general’s feet. He knew what the failure would cost him. “We counted the army correctly, sir! But we weren’t expecting that hundreds and hundreds of citizens would be fighting with them! The trolls surrendered or fled into the Dwarf Forests upon seeing them. *We were defeated!*”

The general took a step closer and stared into De Lange’s eyes. The lava at the bottom of the canyon behind him was nothing compared to the fire in Marquis’s eyes.

“Are you telling me our Armée was defeated by the *peasant men and women* of the Charming Kingdom?” General Marquis asked. His nostrils had never been so wide and his head was so red he looked like he was about to catch on fire himself.

Capitaine De Lange shook his head; he had much worse news to tell

him. “Not just in the Charming Kingdom, sir! Civilians stood with their kingdom’s armies in *all of the kingdoms.* All of our calculations and predictions were correct—but we never could have seen *this* coming! Please believe me when I say we did everything in our power!”

The general turned his fiery gaze toward Colonel Baton, who was shocked by the news. “General, I oversaw the plans myself,” Baton said. “We were positive they would lead to victory.”

The general looked away from the colonel and promptly walked away from the men who had failed him. He had never been so disappointed in his entire military career.

“Lieutenant Rembert, your pistol,” General Marquis demanded.

The lieutenant followed his instructions and retrieved his pistol for the general. In the blink of an eye, General Marquis turned to Colonel Baton and Capitaine De Lange and shot them both in the foot. They fell backward and slid down the canyon walls. They moaned as they tried to get to their feet. A low growling noise vibrated up the canyon walls and the commanders’ moaning increased. A series of deafening screeches echoed next from the canyon, but they weren’t human. The sound was like a thousand nails were being dragged across metal.

“The dragon’s awake!” the Masked Man said, and the entire camp covered their ears.

In between the earsplitting screeches, the camp heard the colonel and the captain scream as they were eaten alive. The general’s wrathful stare never left his face.

Marquis handed Rembert back his pistol. “Congratulations, Rembert, you’re a colonel now,” he said. “Now feed those animals to the dragon once it’s finished with its appetizer.”

“Yes, sir,” Rembert said, and ran off to fetch the stolen livestock.

General Marquis paced up and down the edge of the canyon. He was experiencing the greatest failure of his life—and the general did not take failure well. More than half of his army was gone and it had been defeated by *peasants* of all things. He quietly plotted how his army was going to come back from this catastrophe.

The Masked Man approached him but kept his distance. “You started this war and you can still win it,” he said. “I’ll tell you again, once you have the dragon—”

“If you tell me one more time all I need is a dragon to win this war, I will feed you piece by piece to the dragon myself!” the general warned. “Any hunter knows you cannot kill a boar with one arrow alone. You need one for the head and one for the heart. The dragon may be an arrow I’ll fire into the head of this world, but if I had seized the capitals and the rulers of the kingdoms, I would have had this world’s heart. This army would have been unstoppable.”

Rook had been intently listening to their conversation the entire time. He realized he had information that the general wanted. “General!” he declared, standing with his hand raised. “If it’s the kings and queens you’re after, I know how you can get to them.”

He couldn’t believe what he was doing—it was as if his sense of survival had overridden all his other senses.

The general scowled at the boy and laughed at his pathetic attempt to get his attention. “Silence, before you are fed to the dragon next!”

“I’m serious,” Rook said. The other villagers pleaded for him to sit and stay quiet but he resisted. “The kings and queens were sent away long before your men arrived at the capitals. I saw it happen and I know where they are.”

General Marquis was already angry enough as it was and this village boy claiming to have answers *he* did not, was not helping. “Then tell me where they are,” he said, and walked closer to him.

Rook shook his head. “I’m not telling you unless you set all the villagers free,” he said.

The general was so upset by the mention of another bargain he looked as if lava were going to erupt from inside of him. “Perhaps I’ll kill each of the villagers in front of you *until* you tell me where they are?”

“Excuse me, General?” the Masked Man said. “With all due respect, what the boy is asking for isn’t very much. The villagers are useless so you wouldn’t be losing anything by granting him what he wants in exchange for whatever he might know.”

General Marquis gave the Masked Man the ugliest scowl yet. “*You don’t have the right to give me advice!”* he said, and struck him across the face.

The Masked Man fell to the ground and spit out a mouthful of blood. “I’m only trying to help, General,” he grunted. “If you lose this war, I lose this war, too! I’ll be sent back to prison! I want to see you conquer this

world as much as you do!”

The general slowly caught his breath and walked over to the boy. “All right, tell me and I’ll let these people go free,” he said calmly.

“No,” Rook said. “Let them go first and then I’ll tell you where the royals are.”

The general stared directly at the boy, waiting for his left eye to twitch, but it didn’t. “Fine,” the general said. “But if you don’t supply me with the rulers, I will kill you myself.”

Marquis gestured for his soldiers to let the villagers go and Rook watched as one by one they were set free and ran into the forest. Many of them were hesitant to leave Rook with the soldiers but he assured them he would be fine. Farmer Robins was scooped up by two villagers and escorted out of the camp.

“Don’t do this, Rook! Don’t be a hero!” Farmer Robins cried out. He tried resisting the men helping him escape but his wounds were too painful for him to put up a fight. Rook waited until he was safely out of sight before giving the general the information he needed.

“I don’t know where they are, but I know how to find them,” Rook said.

“Then show us the way,” the general demanded.

Rook closed his eyes and let out a sigh. It wasn’t until after the deal had been made that he realized what he had done, or that by saving a few he had put many at risk. “Forgive me, Alex,” he said to himself.

Had the world been in a better state, traveling down the secret path would have been quite an enjoyable trip. The kings and queens aboard the carriages were exposed to areas of their own kingdoms they had never seen before. They visited with one another and discussed how to make life easier for their kingdoms by reforming the treaties of their trading agreements and they considered how their armies could work together to manage the criminals who traveled between their borders.

The plans were bittersweet, though, knowing as they did that the Armée was still at large and that it would be a while before life would return to normal and they could return to their kingdoms.

Every few hours they stopped to stretch their legs and Goldilocks showed the travelers a new self-defense trick or two as they had requested, and she was impressed by the progress they made in such a short amount of time.

The voyage down the secret path had become a unique bonding experience for all the men and women involved. Goldilocks seemed to be enjoying it the most. She was practically glowing after every lesson and her smile never left her face.

“May I just say, you have never looked more gorgeous,” Jack told his wife. “I’ve never seen you look so happy before.”

“You know me, I love a good adventure,” Goldilocks said. “Especially when I’m accompanied by my dashing husband.”

Jack laughed and squinted at her. “I know you too well to believe that for one minute,” he said. “There’s something else you’re not telling me, isn’t there?”

“All right, I’ll tell you,” Goldilocks said. “Although I would never admit this in front of Red, being around the other queens—the strong, smart, and confident women that they are—has been highly enjoyable.”

Jack’s mouth fell open dramatically. “You mean to tell me my wife is enjoying *girl time*?” he asked with large mocking eyes.

“I think I am,” Goldilocks said, just as amused to confess it as he was to hear it.

“I think there’s even more behind that smile,” Jack said. “You only make that face when you’re about to surprise me with something. Come on, Goldie, you know I don’t like surprises. Just tell me if you have a secret.”

Goldilocks’s smile grew even wider. “Perhaps I do,” she said. “But like all good secrets, it deserves to be kept quiet until the right moment.”

Jack laughed and shook his head. “You and your secrets,” he said. “We could be married for one hundred years and I still would learn new things about you every day.”

“I hope that doesn’t bother you,” Goldilocks said with a wink. “I am a woman of *many* secrets and you’re just scratching the surface.”

An endearing smile came to Jack’s face. “Actually, everything I learn about you only makes me love you more.”

Goldilocks leaned in to kiss him but the horses pulling their carriage suddenly dashed forward and began galloping much faster than they

normally did. They looked forward and saw that the secret path, which usually curved and looped across the land ahead of them, had become perfectly straight and shot directly into the horizon.

“What’s going on?” Goldilocks said.

“We’re headed southeast,” Jack said after glancing up at the sun. “Maybe Alex and the others want us back? Maybe the war is over?”

The carriages raced through the countryside and into the forests of the southeast. The horses began to slow down, however, when a young man came into view on the path ahead. He was in his mid-teens and was tall with floppy brown hair.

Red poked her head out of her carriage window to see what was going on. “I know I’ve never met that boy before, but I could almost swear I know who he is,” she said, wondering how.

The carriages stopped directly in front of him. The young man looked up at them with tears in his eyes.

“Who are you?” Jack asked.

“I’m sorry,” the young man said.

“Sorry about—” but Goldilocks didn’t have a chance to finish her sentence.

A hundred soldiers suddenly emerged from the trees and surrounded the carriages. Jack and Goldilocks quickly retrieved their weapons but there were too many of them to fight. The kings and queens in the carriages screamed as rifles and swords were pointed at them. There wasn’t anything anyone could do—they had been ambushed by the Grande Armée.

General Marquis was the last to appear out of the trees. He stood behind Rook and patted his shoulder. “Well done, my boy,” he said. “Well done, indeed.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE SIGNAL IN THE SKY

The flames on Alex's and Conner's wounds faded as the sun set and night fell upon the tiny cottage in the woods. Soon the flames dimmed more, burning so low only a thin glow covered the healing parts of their bodies.

"The flames are almost gone," Alex said. She stood from the cot and finally could put weight on her leg without any pain.

"My ribs feel good, too," Conner said. He twisted his torso and touched his toes without any difficulty. "I've never felt better! Looks like the fire did the trick!"

"We really need to get going," Alex said to Hagetta.

Hagetta didn't argue with her this time. She retrieved Alex's crystal wand from the fireplace and handed it to her. "Here you are, my dear."

Alex examined her wand and didn't find a scratch on it—it was as good as new. "We'll never forget this kindness," Alex said. "If there is anything we can ever do, please don't hesitate—"

Hagetta raised her hand. "The best thing you can do is to promise me you'll take care of yourselves," she said warmly. "I don't understand why such heavy burdens have been placed on your young shoulders, but the taller you stand, the less weight you'll feel. Don't ever let anything break your spirit, children. Courage is something no one can take away from you."

Alex and Conner exchanged a kindhearted smile with her. Goldilocks had told them the same thing once, and now they knew who she had learned it from.

"We always seem to land on our feet," Conner said. "Except that one time you saw us crash and we almost died—but thanks to you, we even bounced back from that!"

Alex leaned under the table. "Are you ready to go, Lester?"

"Squaaa!" Lester squawked and happily fluttered to his feet, almost knocking the table over in the process.

“Great, then let’s go—”

Suddenly, a heavy knock came on Hagetta’s door. All four of them immediately turned to it.

“Are you expecting company?” Conner asked.

“No,” Hagetta said. She was just as alarmed as the twins were by the sound of a visitor. “Quick, hide behind the cauldron so no one will see you.”

The twins crouched behind the cauldron. Lester dived under the table again and Hagetta placed a large tablecloth over it to shield him better. Alex pointed her wand at the door, preparing for the worst.

Hagetta opened the door only a sliver and peeked outside. “Can I help you?” she asked the caller.

“Hello, sorry to disturb you but I’m looking for a young girl and boy. The goose they were flying was shot from the sky and they were spotted landing in the woods around this area,” said a familiar voice. “Have you seen them?”

Hagetta cautiously opened the door a bit wider so the twins could see who was on the other side.

“Xanthous!” Conner exclaimed, and popped up from behind the cauldron.

“It’s all right, Hagetta, he’s a friend,” Alex said.

Hagetta let him inside and he greeted the twins with enormous hugs. He had never been so happy to see them.

“Alex! Conner! Thank the heavens you’re all right! I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” he said.

His cheerful demeanor confused the twins—weren’t they in the middle of a war? Did he not know the Elf Empire and other territories had been attacked?

“Xanthous, why aren’t you in the Charming Kingdom?” Alex asked. “The Grande Armée has started their attacks! We saw them strike the Elf Empire!”

“We were just about to warn you and the other fairies,” Conner said.

“We already know! *All* the kingdoms have been attacked except for the Fairy Kingdom,” he informed them.

Alex covered her mouth and tears instantly filled her eyes. “Oh no!” she said. “We never expected they would attack all the kingdoms at once! We

didn’t plan for that! I told everyone to split their armies in half! I left everyone outnumbered!”

Xanthous placed his hands on her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. “Alex, you don’t have to be upset. Even with half the armies in hiding, *we* still managed to outnumber *them*!”

Both the twins’ hearts started racing, but for the first time in a while they beat in a good way. Was he telling them good news or were they just imagining it?

“Did you just say you outnumbered the Armée?” Conner asked. “But how is that possible? They were double the size of us.”

A proud smile came to Xanthous’s face. “It seems both sides made a mistake in counting,” he said. “They counted the kingdoms’ armies *after* they were divided and only sent enough soldiers to match those numbers. And it seems we didn’t incorporate the *forgotten army* in our estimates.”

“What forgotten army?” Alex asked. Her head was spinning trying to recall a kingdom or territory they hadn’t counted.

“The citizens!” Xanthous exclaimed. “I’ve never seen anything like it! As soon as the Grande Armée and their recruited criminals crossed into the Charming Kingdom, all the average civilians left their homes to join the army in the fight! And it didn’t just happen in the Charming Kingdom; I’ve heard word from Skylene, Rosette, Tangerina, and Coral—the same thing happened in the other kingdoms as well!”

“That’s awesome!” Conner said with a celebratory fist pump.

It sounded too good to be true and Alex wanted to get all the facts straight before she got her hopes up. “Wait a second. You’re telling me the majority of the Grande Armée has been wiped out and we still have *half* of the Happily Ever After Assembly armies in hiding waiting to reappear?”

“Yes!” Xanthous nodded.

“So that means *we* outnumber them now! And by a lot!” Conner happily concluded.

“We do!” Xanthous said, and picked up both the twins and whirled them around the cottage. “We just might win this war after all!”

The twins were so happy to hear this they hollered and jumped around the cottage. Their celebration was cut short when Alex remembered there may have been more than just soldiers at stake.

“Xanthous, the war isn’t over yet,” she said. “There is a chance the

Grande Armée has obtained a dragon egg! We still need to rally every last soldier we can and get to the Fairy Kingdom before the Armée does! I bet they're planning to strike it last!"

"But that's impossible," Xanthous said. "Dragons have been extinct for hundreds and hundreds of years."

"I'm afraid it's very possible," Hagetta said. "I've never seen one myself but there have been rumors among the witch community for a very long time that one or two were preserved."

Xanthous sighed and the flames on his head and shoulders went low as he thought about it. "Then let's not waste another minute," he said. "Alex, it's time for the signal. Let's get back to the Fairy Kingdom—it should only take the kingdoms' armies a day or two to meet us there."

"No, that's not good enough," Conner said. "We need a way to get all these men to the Fairy Palace *now.* As soon as the general hears his units have been defeated he'll want to strike again soon."

"But you can't get thousands and thousands of men to the same place at one time," Xanthous said. "There isn't a flying ship or a secret path large enough."

Alex went very quiet and thought to herself. "It'll have to be a spell—possibly the biggest act of magic ever done in the history of the fairy-tale world," she said. "The signal has to alert all the soldiers and transport them to the Fairy Kingdom at the same time."

"But who or what is *that* powerful?" Conner said. "I don't think Grandma or the Enchantress could pull off something like that."

Xanthous and Alex looked at each other but neither of them had an answer or an idea. Alex thought back to her magic lessons with her grandmother—if Alex could just visualize something well enough, she knew she could make it happen. But what could she possibly visualize that would accomplish this?

Hagetta cleared her throat. "If I were you, I would use the night sky as an ally," she said. "During times of trouble, most people look to the stars for guidance."

It was exactly what Alex needed to hear. Her eyes grew and she looked up to the cottage ceiling as the idea came to her. She imagined it perfectly, as if she were seeing it projected on the ceiling above her. "I know what the spell has to be!" she said. "I'm going to need help, but I think it's crazy

enough to work!”

“You’ve never let us down before,” Xanthous said.

His words were encouraging and Alex needed encouragement now more than ever. “Xanthous, I want you to collect all the fairies stationed throughout the kingdoms and meet us back in the Fairy Kingdom,” Alex said. “Conner and Lester, you’ll come with me.”

Xanthous bowed to Alex and Conner. “I’ll see you there.” He burst into bright shimmering sparks and disappeared into thin air.

“Where are we going?” Conner asked, but before she could answer, Alex raced out of the cottage and onto the grassy lawn outside. Conner and Lester quickly followed her out and Hagetta watched from the doorway.

Alex climbed onto Lester’s back and took his reins. She gestured for Conner to do the same and this time he sat behind her on the goose.

“Lester, I want you to fly as high into the sky as you possibly can,” she instructed him, and he nodded eagerly.

“So what are you going to do?” Conner asked Alex. “This might be the single most important spell you’ll ever cast in your life—no pressure or anything!”

Alex looked over her shoulder with a twinkle in her eye. “It’s not what *I’m* going to do, it’s what *we’re* going to do.”

“Huh? What am I supposed to do?” Conner asked.

“You’ll see,” Alex said with a mischievous grin. “All right, Lester, let’s go!”

Lester spread his enormous wings and lunged forward. The twins waved back to Hagetta as he soared into the sky.

“Thank you for everything, Hagetta!” Conner called behind them.

“Best of luck, children!” she said, and waved them off.

They flew so high into the night sky Hagetta’s cottage disappeared from view. All they could see was a sea of trees that stretched into the distance for miles around. Lester tirelessly flapped his wings until the air became too thin and he couldn’t fly any higher.

“This is good, boy,” Alex said, and raised her wand over her head. “Conner, hold my wand with me—you’re helping me do this.”

“Me? I don’t know how to do magic!”

“Yes you do,” Alex assured him. “You’re just as capable as me—you just have to believe it! No matter how much you deny it, there is just as

much magic in your blood as there is in mine. Grandma taught me that the key to magic is having confidence—and with your help, I know we can make this spell work."

Conner was hesitant. "Okay, but if this doesn't work, it's not my fault."

"I know it will!" Alex said. "Just believe you can do this! And hold on, we're about to go *very fast*!"

Conner reluctantly grabbed the end of his sister's wand and they raised it together.

The world appeared to go in slow motion as they raised the wand above their heads. The twins could feel magic rush through their bodies and into the wand in their hands. Not only did they feel it surging from inside of them, but they also felt it traveling through the air around them. It was as if they were summoning all the magic in the world to help them cast this spell.

The twins pointed the wand into the sky directly ahead of them and a gigantic blast of white light erupted from the tip and surrounded them. Like a cannonball, they shot through the air and headed toward the Fairy Kingdom. Alex and Conner had turned themselves and Lester into a shooting star that bolted across the sky faster than anything had ever traveled before.

It was so bright everyone and everything in all the kingdoms below stared up at it in bewilderment. Upon seeing it, every soldier of the Happily Ever After Assembly armies, on duty or in hiding, turned into his or her own sphere of light and instantly shot through the sky to join the twins. The more kingdoms they traveled across, the more soldiers were attached, and the larger the star became. It was as if thousands and thousands of shooting stars had been launched from the ground and then came together to form a massive comet.

With one flick of a wand, Alex and Conner had performed the greatest act of magic ever achieved. They united all the armies in the world so they could finish off the Armée who had threatened their home. Together they flew across the night sky, heading to the Fairy Palace with enough light to re-start the sun.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE BATTLE FOR THE FAIRY KINGDOM

Emerelda and Mother Goose paced on the grand balcony of the Fairy Palace. One by one, the other fairies of the Fairy Council appeared beside them. Xanthous was the last fairy to arrive after retrieving the others and immediately ran to the railing and searched the gardens below.

"Have Alex and Conner arrived with the other armies yet?" he asked the others.

"What do you mean 'with the other armies'?" Emerelda asked.

"Xanny, calm down for a second and tell us what's going on," Mother Goose said.

Xanthous turned back to the other fairies and his flames flickered as he grew anxious. "Alex and Conner were going to collect the armies of the other kingdoms and bring them here before the Grande Armée arrived."

"But it would take days for all those soldiers to travel here," Violetta said.

"Alex was going to cast a spell so they would all arrive at the same time," Xanthous explained.

"What kind of spell could do that?" Skylene asked.

"That would take more magic than all our powers put together," Tangerina added.

Xanthous was frustrated by their lack of faith and his flames rose. "Ladies, we've trusted her since the beginning; we can't start doubting her now."

Mother Goose went to the railing and became fixated on something moving in the trees beyond the gardens. "Well, I sure hope whatever spell she tried works, because the Grande Armée is here!" she said.

The fairies joined her at the railing and looked into the distance. Two thousand of the remaining Grande Armée soldiers appeared through the trees. They came from all directions and completely surrounded the gardens and the Fairy Palace. Soldiers positioned themselves in rows and raised

their rifles. They wheeled cannons and directed them toward the palace.

At the edge of the gardens, a dozen or so soldiers planted seven tall poles into the ground and stacked piles of hay and dried twigs around the base of the poles.

“What on earth are they doing?” Rosette asked.

Three carriages appeared and were steered to the poles. Only the first carriage had horses while the other two followed behind it magically. The fairies on the balcony screamed and covered their mouths as soon as they realized they were the same carriages that had been sent on the secret path. They could see the kings, queens, and others trapped inside them.

The kings and queens were yanked out of the carriages and taken to the poles. Princess Hope and Princess Ash were forced out of their mothers’ arms and thrown into a carriage with Emmerich and Bree.

Queen Cinderella and King Chance were tied to the first pole, Queen Sleeping Beauty and King Chase were tied to the second, Queen Snow White and King Chandler were tied to the third, Queen Rapunzel and Sir William were tied to the fourth, and Queen Little Bo was tied to the fifth. Jack and Goldilocks were even included, and were tied to the sixth pole. Froggy and Red were tied to the seventh.

“If you would just listen to me for one second, I could explain I’m not the queen anymore,” Red tried telling one of the Armée soldiers. “*She’s* the queen now—she won the election and therefore being publicly executed is one of *her* responsibilities, not mine!”

She rapidly jerked her head in Little Bo’s direction, but the soldier wasn’t listening to a word she said.

A handful of the Armée soldiers began drumming while others lit torches and stood near the royals. The Fairy Council was about to witness a horrible execution. General Marquis stood on top of the center carriage and made an announcement to all the fairies in the gardens and at the palace before him.

“Fairies! This is your one and only opportunity to surrender to the Grande Armée!” he declared. “Take this opportunity and I will spare the leaders of your world. Fail to surrender and you will watch them die horrible deaths!”

“Choose the first option!” Red cried up at the Fairy Council.

The fairies living in the gardens peeked out from the plants and trees.

They were horrified by what they saw, but there were too many soldiers for them to do anything.

"You have until the count of three," the general shouted. *"One…"*

The fairies in the gardens looked up to the Fairy Council members on the balcony. They silently pleaded with them to do something.

"Two…"

The Fairy Council whispered among themselves but no one had a solution.

"Three!" the general shouted with a dissatisfied frown. He had been expecting the fairies to surrender but to his surprise, they stayed on the balcony and did nothing. "Your time is up! *Les graver sur!*"

The soldiers threw torches onto the piles of dried hay and sticks around the poles and the executions began. Many of the queens screamed, and the kings yelled for help. The flames climbed higher and higher. They were seconds away from being burned at the stake unless the fairies helped them.

"Mother Goose, stay here and watch over the palace," Emerelda said. "The rest of you, follow me. We will not surrender but we must stop this before someone gets killed."

"Please hurry, Alex," Xanthous whispered to himself.

Several flashing lights appeared at the edge of the gardens and Emerelda, Xanthous, Tangerina, Skylene, Rosette, Violetta, and Coral appeared in front of the soldiers. All the cannons and rifles were raised at them, waiting for orders to fire. Emerelda lowered her hands and the fires at the base of the poles faded.

"Stop putting out those flames unless you want my men to open fire!" the general yelled.

There were too many guns and cannons pointed at them for the fairies to properly shield themselves in time. If the general ordered his men to fire, there was no way the fairies would survive.

"You are an evil man, General Marquis," Emerelda called back to him. "And unfortunately for you, you've attempted to dominate a world that does not tolerate the wicked. We may not be able to stop your Armée from taking our kingdom today, but *you will be stopped.* You will not win this war—this world will not let you! This world doesn't want you here! Untie these men and women at once and admit your failure with dignity, or suffer the consequences when the other armies arrive."

The Grande Armée soldiers looked around the fairy gardens nervously, but the general's attitude was not affected in the slightest. Emerelda's warning only made him angrier. He had been given so many ultimatums he couldn't tolerate one more.

"Fire at will!" he roared at his men.

The Armée loaded their cannons and cocked their rifles. The gardens buzzed with panic as the observing fairies feared the Fairy Council were about to be murdered in front of their eyes.

Suddenly, a bright light filled the sky as a shooting star appeared. It caught everyone's attention, especially that of the general and the Grande Armée soldiers. They had never seen anything like it in their world—but neither had anyone in the fairy-tale world. It was too bright to be an average star and it grew bigger and bigger as it traveled closer and closer to the Fairy Kingdom.

"Take cover!" the general ordered his men, and dove off the carriage. All the Grande Armée soldiers fell to the ground and covered their heads. The Fairy Council and the fairies in the gardens stayed still as they stared up at the star in amazement—they knew this was an act of magic. Alex and Conner had arrived.

The star hit the center of the fairy gardens with such a strong impact it caused a massive breeze to sweep through the plants and extinguish the flames growing around the poles. Once the breeze faded and the dust lifted, the Fairy Council could see Alex and Conner aboard Lester in the center of the gardens and they were surrounded by the armies of the Charming Kingdom, the Bo Peep Republic, the Eastern Kingdom, the Northern Kingdom, the Corner Kingdom, and the Great Troblin Lake. The twins' spell had worked.

It was one of the most spectacular things anyone in the Fairy Kingdom had ever witnessed. Everyone looked around in astonishment—especially the incoming soldiers. Only seconds before this they had been in their own kingdoms.

"That was one heck of a spell, Alex!" Conner said. He was a little dizzy from the journey himself.

Alex looked around their new surroundings and a big smile came to her face. "We did it, Conner! We brought the armies here!" she said, and gave her brother a giant hug.

“It looks like the Grande Armée beat us, though.” He pointed ahead of them.

All the pride in their accomplishment drained away when they saw the Fairy Council standing in front of the Grande Armée at the edge of the gardens. To their absolute horror, they saw the Armée had captured the kings and queens and their friends, too, and they felt sick to their stomachs.

“They have everyone from the secret path!” Conner shrieked.

“How is that possible?” Alex gasped. “Someone must have betrayed us! The only people who could have found them were the people who saw them embark on the secret path!”

The Armée soldiers quickly got to their feet and aimed their rifles and cannons, not just at the Fairy Council, but at everyone they surrounded in the gardens.

“I think that’s a mystery we’ll have to save for later,” Conner said.

“You two come up with a plan and take cover! I’ll hold them off for as long as I can!” Emerelda yelled at the twins over her shoulder.

“Fire!” General Marquis demanded as he got to his feet. *“Kill them! Kill them all!”*

Emerelda raised her hands and the gardens and palace were surrounded with a thick sheet of emerald light. The sheet acted as a temporary force field against the firing cannons and rifles. It took every last bit of Emerelda’s strength to conjure it.

“Hurry!” Emerelda grunted. *“I can’t hold it for very long!”*

Alex couldn’t think—she was in a state of shock knowing one of their own had told the Grande Armée about the secret path. Conner didn’t wait to consult with his sister; he jumped off Lester’s back and began instructing the soldiers and the fairies around them. They had to strategize as quickly as possible.

“All right, men, I know I’m half your age and size but listen to me!” he shouted. “I want all of you to line the edge of the gardens and don’t let the Grande Armée through. The soldiers from the Northern Kingdom will guard the north side with Skylene. The Charming Kingdom army will protect the south side with Xanthous. The Eastern Kingdom army will protect the east side with Tangerina. The Corner Kingdom army will take the west side with the soldiers from the Bo Peep Republic. We cannot let them get to the Fairy Palace.”

The armies were hesitant to take orders from a fourteen-year-old boy.

“What? Did I stutter?” Conner asked.

“You heard the boy!” Sir Lampton said, coming to Conner’s rescue. “Let’s surround the gardens!”

The armies followed Lampton’s lead and separated into the directions Conner had instructed. Conner felt a tug on his shirt. He turned around and saw Queen Trollbella standing behind him.

“What about us, Butterboy?” she asked, and batted her eyelashes. “What do you want the Troblin Army to do?”

“Trollbella? Who invited you to this war?” Conner asked hysterically.

“I couldn’t stay home while my troblins came and had all the fun, so I joined my own army,” she said, and then pulled him down closer to whisper in his ear. *“I also couldn’t let my Gator go to war by himself—he would miss me too much.”*

Trollbella blew a kiss to Gator, who stood a few feet away, and he gulped—the relationship he had never agreed to had gotten way out of hand. Conner eyed the anxious Troblin Army around him and thought of the perfect assignment.

“Rosette! Violetta! Coral!” he called to the remaining fairies. “Before the Elf Empire was attacked, they agreed to help us—we have more than enough men here but since they didn’t arrive with us I assume it means they’re still fighting the Grande Armée in their own territory. I want the three of you to take as many troblins as possible to the Elf Empire and help them.”

Rosette couldn’t stop herself from shaking her head at his request. “You want us to help the *elves*? But they would be outraged if we showed up—”

“They can file a complaint later!” Conner said. “We’ve got to get rid of *all* these guys no matter how many bridges we burn!”

Rosette, Coral, and Violetta shrugged and agreed to the task.

“All right, troblins, everyone grab hands and hold on tightly,” Coral instructed.

The Troblin Army joined hands and formed three groups, one around each fairy. They slowly disappeared into sparkling clouds of colorful dust as they traveled to the Elf Empire. Trollbella had joined hands with them, too, but Conner grabbed her and Gator out of the group before they disappeared with the others.

“Not you, Trollbella!” Conner said. “I want you, Gator, and the remaining troblins to wait by the Fairy Palace. It’ll be safest there.”

Trollbella looked at him like it was the sweetest thing anyone had ever told her. “Even during war, my safety is your biggest concern,” she said. “I feel your love like a warm blanket over my body, Butter—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah—just go!” Conner pushed her and Gator toward the palace.

“Everyone take cover!” Emerelda screamed. She couldn’t hold off the bullets and the cannons anymore and collapsed to her knees. The sheet of emerald light faded as quickly as it had appeared. The armies of the Happily Ever After Assembly took cover behind trees and boulders as they moved to their positions between the Grande Armée and the gardens.

Conner jumped back onto Lester, and with one large flap of his wings, Lester flew the twins to Emerelda’s side. Alex pointed her wand at the soldiers shooting at them and their rifles turned into large snakes that wrapped around their hands.

Emerelda was so exhausted she could barely stand. The twins helped her to her feet and placed her on Lester’s back.

“Lester, take Emerelda to the Fairy Palace,” Alex said.

The gander squawked and took off with the green fairy draped across his back. Conner looked around the gardens and saw that most of the armies had made it to their assigned posts.

“Now what do we do?” Alex asked her brother.

“We’ll get the royals and our friends to safety,” Conner said.

The twins ran toward the front of the gardens where the carriages and poles had been placed.

“Kill them!” the general demanded as the twins charged toward them.

“But sir, they’re children,” Colonel Rembert said.

“If they want to fight like men, then they can die like men,” General Marquis said. *“Now fire!”*

The Grande Armée soldiers around him guarding the captive royals pointed their rifles directly at the twins. Alex raised her wand and waved it toward their feet. Vines like leafy nets shot out of the ground and pulled the general and his men to the earth. They struggled against the vines but Alex knew they wouldn’t hold them down for long.

“Good job, Alex!” Froggy said.

“Nice one!” Jack said.

“Untie me first!” Red cried.

Alex pointed her wand at her brother’s palm and a long, shiny, silver sword appeared in his hand. He used the sword to slice open the ropes binding Froggy’s and Red’s hands together first. As Conner cut the ropes, Alex stood guard.

Several Grande Armée soldiers ran to their general’s aid and Alex swished her wand through the air at them. Their rifles were transformed into long-stemmed roses that pricked their fingers before they could shoot.

“Jack,” Goldilocks whispered to her husband, who was tied next to her.

“Yes, my love?”

“I have something I need to tell you, and now might be the only chance I get.”

“This may be the worst predicament we’ve been in yet, but there’s no need for good-bye,” he said.

“No, that’s not it,” Goldilocks said. “It’s what I kept from you on the secret path. Jack, *I’m pregnant.*”

As if the world had suddenly been paused, Jack lost all sense of sound and thought. All he could see was his beautiful wife beside him and all he could think about was the beautiful news she had shared with him.

“What?” Jack said with an enormous smile. “You mean it?”

Goldilocks smiled and happily nodded. “Yes—does it make you happy?”

Jack laughed and tears filled his eyes. “Even though we just barely survived an execution and war is all around us, you’ve made me the happiest man in the world,” he said.

Conner ran to Jack and Goldilocks next and sliced open the ropes around their hands and feet. “You two look *way* too happy to be in the middle of a war right now,” he said, and stared at them oddly.

“Alex, do you mind supplying us with hardware?” Goldilocks asked, and she and Jack held out their empty hands. Alex flicked her wand at each of them and supplied them with a sword and an axe.

“We’ll finish untying the royals; you two get the kids to safety,” Jack told the twins. He gestured to the carriage behind them, where Bree and Emmerich were trapped inside. The carriage door had been locked but Conner sliced it open with his sword in one strike—he was impressing

himself with this sword business.

“Conner! It’s so good to see you!” Bree threw her arms around his neck.

“Are you guys all right?” Conner asked his friends.

“Besides jumping out of our skin with fear, we’re fine,” Emmerich said with large eyes.

He was holding Princess Ash in his arms and Bree helped Princess Hope out of the carriage after her. Conner whistled for Lester and the goose returned from the palace in a matter of seconds. “Lester, take these four to the palace, too! Make sure they get inside safely—they mean a lot to me.”

Lester saluted him with the tip of his wing and crouched down so Bree and Emmerich could climb aboard his back.

“Are you coming?” Bree asked Conner.

“I’ll be there soon.” He winked at her. “But don’t worry.”

“Impossible,” she said.

It made Conner feel like a million bucks but he knew this was no time to be sentimental. He nodded at Lester and the goose took off toward the palace with his friends before Bree could see him blush again. Bree and Emmerich held on to the little princesses tightly as they flew. Conner watched them go until he saw them land safely on the grand balcony in the distance.

Sounds of gunfire and cannons came less and less as the Grande Armée began running out of bullets and cannonballs. Most of the French soldiers tossed their firearms aside and charged toward the gardens with their swords. The Happily Ever After Assembly armies ran out from the trees and boulders shielding them and fought them. The echoes of gunfire were replaced with the clashing of swords—the real fight had begun.

Jack and Goldilocks sliced through all the ropes binding the kings and queens to the poles. Little Bo was the last one freed, but being saved seemed like the last thing on her mind. She searched the rows of Grande Armée soldiers surrounding the gardens as if she had lost someone in a crowd. Once Jack cut through the ropes around her wrists, she ran straight into the gardens with no explanation of where she was going.

“Come back! It’s not safe!” Froggy yelled at her.

“We should have kept her tied up,” Red said.

“I think she may be in shock,” Froggy said. “Come on, dear—we have to catch her before she gets herself killed!”

“Do we *have to*—or is it just *the right thing to do*?” Red asked with a snide look. Before she could argue anymore, Froggy pulled Red into the gardens with him, determined to save the queen.

Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty ran to the carriage their daughters had been placed in and were alarmed to see they weren’t there anymore.

“Where are the girls?” Cinderella asked desperately, looking at the trees around them.

“Don’t worry, I sent them with my friends, back to the palace,” Conner said. “They’re safe.”

“Oh, thank the stars,” Sleeping Beauty said, and placed a hand on Cinderella’s shoulder. Their postures sank almost a foot knowing their daughters were safe.

“We should escort the kings and queens to the palace, too,” Goldilocks suggested.

“No! We said we wanted to help our armies fight and we meant it!” Snow White insisted.

All the kings and queens nodded eagerly along with her.

“Your Majesties, with all due respect, this is an actual war and a few roadside lessons with large sticks is no match for what we’re fighting tonight,” Jack said.

Rapunzel quickly turned to Conner. “Was it true about our people fighting off the Grande Armée at home?” she asked him, and the question gained all the royals’ attention. “We heard soldiers talking about it when we were taken prisoner, but is it true?”

“Yes,” Conner told them. “You should be very proud of your citizens—they kind of rock.”

The kings and queens looked at one another and the same confident smirks appeared on their faces. “Then I have no plans of seeking refuge,” Chance told the group. “If our people could be so brave, then we can as well!”

The general and the soldiers lying on the ground started breaking through the vines holding them. Alex waved her wand and more vines grew, but there wasn’t time for Jack and Goldilocks or the twins to argue with the eager royals.

“All right, we’ll lead our own little fleet into battle,” Goldilocks said. “But everyone follow closely behind us and watch each other’s backs!”

“Don’t go unprotected!” Alex pointed her wand at each of them and swords and shields appeared in their hands.

“I never thought I would ever say this, but *let’s fight*!” Cinderella raised her sword in the air. The other kings and queens did the same and Jack and Goldilocks led them into the gardens to fight alongside their armies.

Conner looked around the gardens. The Happily Ever After Assembly armies were now fighting the Grande Armée soldiers all over the gardens. It was hard to tell which soldier belonged to which kingdom. They were doing well holding the enemy back, but the troblins at the front steps of the palace looked very worried as the battle crept toward them.

“We should get to the palace and help the troblins,” Conner said.

“I agree—” Alex nodded, but something suddenly distracted her. A persistent beating noise was coming from somewhere close behind her.

“Alex! Help me!” said a familiar voice.

Alex followed the sound and found Rook. He had been locked in one of the carriages. Her heart dropped and she immediately went to free him.

“Rook? What are you doing here?” Alex asked. “How did you get inside the… *carriage*?”

Before she could finish asking the question it suddenly dawned on her. Other than the fairies and her brother, Rook was the only person who had witnessed the kings and queens being sent down the secret path.

“Alex! Please let me out!” Rook pleaded.

All the color drained from her face and she didn’t move. Her hand had been a second away from unlocking the latch. *“It was you,”* she gasped. *“You told the general about the secret path.”*

Although she knew there was no other possible explanation, Alex prayed she was wrong. She wished for the first time in history there could be an alternative version to the truth.

Rook didn’t even try to deny it. “Yes, it was me, but I didn’t have a choice!”

She burst into tears as her heart burst into pieces. He was the person she had thought she could depend on for anything. She had never allowed someone so deep inside her heart before. The joy she had thought was evolving into love was just the foreshadowing of a stab in the back.

“I can’t believe this,” she sobbed. “I trusted you, Rook! I trusted you!”

Tears formed in Rook’s eyes seeing her so hurt. “Alex, I never meant to

betray you! You have to listen to me—my father was hurt so I told the general where the secret path was so he could get help! Now please, you have to let me out—there's something the general is planning that I have to tell you about—"

"How am I supposed to trust you now?" she asked.

"Alex! Behind you!" Conner shouted.

Alex turned around and saw a dozen Grande Armée soldiers sneaking up behind her. Half of them cut the general and his men free from the vines and the other half came at the twins with their weapons raised. Without thinking, Alex took her heartbreak out on the soldiers charging at her. She cracked her wand like a whip and a burst of white light sent the soldiers flying into the air.

Conner was just as terrified as he was impressed. "Alex?" he said meekly.

"I don't know what came over me…," Alex said breathlessly. "I… I… I just hurt all of those men!"

"Alex, it's all right!" Conner said, and cautiously approached his sister. "They were about to do the same to you!"

Alex's eyes darted around the gardens. In a matter of seconds she had completely lost sight of who she was. The anger and heartbreak consuming her had turned her into another person entirely.

The soldiers finished cutting the vines around the general and his men.

"Let's get to the palace now!" Conner said.

"Alex, please let me out!" Rook pleaded.

Freeing him was the last thing Alex wanted to do. She pointed her wand at the carriage door and five more latches appeared.

"No, Alex!" Rook said. "Don't do this! I have to tell you about the—"

"I never want to see you again," she told him.

Conner ran up to his sister and grabbed her arm. They dashed into the gardens ahead and disappeared from Rook's view.

General Marquis got to his feet and brushed off the vines. He looked at the battle around him and his nostrils flared. His men were horribly outnumbered. It was only a matter of minutes before the Grande Armée would be defeated entirely.

"Colonel Rembert!" he cried out.

"Yes, General?" Rembert said, running up to him.

“It’s time we started phase two of our plan,” the general ordered. “Get the Masked Man! Tell him to bring the dragon here at once! It’s time we finished this war.”

The thought of the dragon surfacing sent shivers down Rembert’s spine. “Yes, sir,” he said.

The twins zigzagged through the gardens, headed for the palace. Alex was crying so hard she couldn’t run anymore and fell behind a giant patch of daisies. Conner kneeled down beside her and she buried her face into his shoulder.

“I’m assuming Rook was more than a friend,” Conner said, and wiped his sister’s tears with the corner of his shirt.

“Oh, Conner, I feel so stupid,” she said. “This is all my fault! I let my heart get in the way of my head and it almost got our friends killed!”

“Hey, hey, hey,” he said. “Everything’s okay. We got to them and everyone is safe—as safe as possible, that is.”

“I feel like a piece of glass that’s been stepped on,” Alex cried. “I feel so broken inside I don’t know how to be myself anymore. Now I understand why Ezmia was the way she was—you saw what I did to those soldiers! I’m no better than she was.”

Conner pulled his sister up so he could look her directly in the eye. “Alex, stop talking like that!” he said. “You are not going to let one stupid boy who needs a haircut change who you are, do you understand me? The Alex I know would kick herself for even saying something like that! Ezmia was a whiny and narcissistic wench and you will never be her no matter what happens to you. Now you’re going to snap out of it and we’re going to help our friends win this war!”

Alex sat up and slowly nodded. “All right,” she said.

“Good. Now let’s get to the palace and help the troblins.”

He helped his sister to her feet and they continued through the gardens. Everywhere they looked they saw that the battle was persisting—but from the looks of it, *the Happily Ever After Assembly was winning*!

They saw seven Grande Armée soldiers surround Skylene with their swords exposed. Just as they went in for the kill, Skylene spun her hands above her head and the water from a nearby pond jetted at the soldiers like an enormous fire hose.

Soldiers chased Tangerina through the gardens and cornered her against

a tall hedge wall. They raised their rifles at her and she raised her hands toward them. A thousand angry bees flew out of her sleeves and beehive and attacked the men. They fell to the ground as the bees stung them over and over again. A smirk appeared on Tangerina's face—it was almost therapeutic for her.

Cannons were aimed at Xanthous and the Charming Army fighting alongside him. Small balls of fire grew in Xanthous's hands and he threw them at the cannons, causing them to explode before they could be set off. The men around him cheered and one burned himself when he tried to pat Xanthous on the back.

The fairies who lived in the gardens did their part, too. Fairies of all sizes pulled the soldiers' pants down or stole their hats as they wandered by. Some fairies even enchanted the giant plants in the gardens to grab the soldiers with their leaves and hold them tightly against their stems.

The twins saw Goldilocks and the queens go back to back as they fought off a group of Frenchmen circling them. The soldiers were cocky and laughed at the women challenging them.

"We'll do that trick I taught you in the Northern Kingdom meadow—on three," Goldilocks instructed the women. "One, two, *three*!"

The women dove to the ground and somersaulted into the soldiers, knocking them down. Two soldiers scuttled to their feet but Cinderella and Snow White tripped them using Rapunzel's hair.

"Well done, Your Majesty!" Sir Lampton called across the gardens.

"Thank you, Sir Lampton!" Cinderella called back.

Sir Lampton was battling his own group of Grande Armée soldiers with Jack and the kings. The Charming brothers were competitively seeing which of them could knock the most soldiers to the ground and they counted each man they disarmed.

"That's sixteen for Chandler, fourteen for Chance, and twenty for me," Chase declared.

Jack hit the ground and kicked a soldier's legs out from under him. "Nice try, boys," Jack teased. "But that was my *fiftieth*!"

Mother Goose flew through the air on Lester's back. She couldn't stay cooped up at the palace any longer and had decided to join the fight.

"All right, Lester! Just like that time we narrowly escaped those kamikaze pilots during World War II!" she instructed the gander.

The giant goose stretched out his wings and spun in the air like a fighter jet. Mother Goose held a basketful of empty bottles of bubbly she had been saving and threw them at the Grande Armée soldiers as they flew over them. Cannons were aimed at her but Mother Goose snapped her fingers and the cannonballs were transformed into big soapy bubbles.

One of the cannons fired at Mother Goose went astray and blasted a hole in the side of the carriage Rook was locked in. Had he been just a few inches to the left, he would have lost his life. Instead, Rook climbed through the hole in the carriage and rolled onto the ground. He ran into the woods away from the battle zone. He had tried to warn Alex but she wouldn't listen—the fairies were no match for what was coming their way.

Alex and Conner were a few yards from the front steps of the Fairy Palace when they saw Little Bo run past them. She was followed closely by Froggy and Red and didn't show any sign of stopping.

"Your Highness—" Froggy called after her.

"Your *Elected* Highness," Red corrected him.

"Little Bo, please stop running!" Froggy pleaded.

Alex and Conner chased after their friends. Little Bo sprinted just as determinedly as ever.

"What's going on?" Alex asked them.

"Isn't it obvious? Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and doesn't know where to find them!" Red yelled back at them.

"That's not funny, Red!" Froggy reprimanded.

"And by sheep I mean *her mind*! She won't stop running!" Red said.

Little Bo frantically raced through the gardens on the search for someone or something. She scanned row after row of Grande Armée soldiers; once she realized whoever she was looking for wasn't among them she would dart across the gardens toward another row.

"Where are you?" Little Bo said to herself as she ran.

Froggy and Red were starting to lose energy and they slowed down. Little Bo's pace never slowed and she broke free of the group trailing her and ran farther into the gardens.

"It's no use," Froggy said, and stopped running. "She won't listen to reason."

Red and the twins caught up to him. Conner glanced back at the palace behind him and saw a cluster of Grande Armée soldiers had snuck through

the gardens and were now battling the troblins on the front steps. Trollbella sat on the steps just behind Gator and cheered him on as he fought off a soldier.

“Go, Gator, go! Go, Gator, go!” she chanted and happily clapped like she was at a sporting event. “Get him with your sword! Get him with your sword!”

“Oh no,” Conner said. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this!”

Conner bolted to the Troblin Army’s aid but didn’t get there fast enough. Gator was too small to fight the soldier off alone and lost his balance. The soldier stabbed him in the stomach and Gator fell to the ground.

“GATOR!” Trollbella screamed.

“Nooo!” Conner yelled. He lunged toward the soldier with his sword. The soldier was much stronger than Conner and he nearly suffered the same fate. Alex pointed her wand at the soldier dueling her brother and a bright red blast erupted from the tip and hit him in the chest. The soldier flew into the air and the other Grande Armée soldiers retreated in fear.

Trollbella placed Gator’s head in her lap while he took his last breaths.

“Don’t leave me, Gator,” Trollbella said with tears spilling from her big eyes.

“Trollbella?” Gator said, looking up at her. *“Before I go, I just needed to tell you—”*

“You want to marry me, I know!” Trollbella cried hysterically. “Yes, Gator! I want to get married, too!”

Gator was shocked the troll queen had interrupted his dying words. It wasn’t what he had intended to say, but the little troll died before he could say another word. Trollbella rocked him in her arms and tears rolled off her face and onto his.

“Come back, Gator!” she cried. “Please, come back!”

Alex, Froggy, and Red joined Conner and the troblins at the front steps of the palace and they all stared quietly at the sad troll queen.

“No war is without its casualties, I’m afraid,” Froggy said.

As the twins looked around the gardens they saw more and more Grande Armée soldiers retreating into the woods. Xanthous appeared beside them, followed by Tangerina and Skylene.

“The Grande Armée has fled from the south gardens,” he told the twins.

“They’ve left the east side as well,” Tangerina said.

“And they’ve retreated from the north and west, also,” Skylene said.

Xanthous looked sadly to the ground. “Many of our men were lost, but I think it’s safe to say this battle is over.”

Rosette reappeared from the Elf Empire with good news to share as well. “It was a bit of a mess when we arrived, but the soldiers and the ogres accompanying the Grande Armée fled into the Dwarf Forests,” she told the others. “The empire’s tree is severely damaged and a lot of the elves lost their homes, but Empress Elvina is safe. Violetta and Coral stayed behind to help them clean it up.”

“That’s good to hear,” Alex said. “We’re in about the same shape here.”

Soon the armies gathered alongside their kings and queens as they made their way from the gardens and regrouped with others at the front of the palace. Mother Goose and Lester landed next to the twins and Jack and Goldilocks joined them, too. Every man, woman, troll, goblin, and fairy looked exhausted—but an underlying pride was felt among them: They had fought off the Grande Armée together.

Conner walked through the crowd and headed to the center of the gardens.

“Conner, where are you going?” Alex asked.

“To end this,” he said.

He walked until he was halfway between the Happily Ever After Assembly armies at the front of the palace and the general and his men at the edge of the gardens. Only a couple dozen Grande Armée soldiers remained with the general and each looked more exhausted than the last. They leaned against the carriages and poles and one another. They were completely out of bullets and cannonballs and most of them had lost their swords.

General Marquis was the only one who seemed to have any life left in him. He stood as tall and as spiteful as ever—as if he still thought there was a chance the Grande Armée could win.

“The war is over!” Conner shouted at the general and his men. “It’s time to surrender, General, before one more life is lost.”

A menacing smile grew on General Marquis’s face. “The Grande Armée never surrenders!” he said.

Conner threw his sword on the ground to further prove his point. “The Grande Armée is gone,” he said. “You and your men were trapped in that

portal for two hundred years! There is no French Empire for you to go home to! Napoleon is dead! You and your men aren't fighting for anything anymore."

The Grande Armée soldiers whispered to one another—was it true? Had they really lost all sense of time in the portal? The general held his stoic face and laughed at Conner.

"You stupid, pathetic, ignorant little boy," Marquis said. "Do you insult my intelligence trying to fool me with these lies? I did not travel all this way to be defeated! This war has only begun!"

A thunderous pulsing vibrated through the ground like a massive heartbeat. Conner looked at the ground and saw his sword quivering as if something gigantic was heading their way. The tremor grew with every beat and the Fairy Palace began shaking as if the kingdom was being rattled by earthquakes.

Smoke filled the sky above the treetops in the distance. A horrible screeching noise erupted through the air. Everyone standing at the palace covered their ears from the dreadful sound.

"Oh no," Alex said, and her face went pale.

"It can't be," Mother Goose faintly whispered to herself.

The Happily Ever After Assembly watched in horror as the silhouette of a gargantuan creature appeared above the trees. The rumors of the egg were true; a dragon had risen in the Land of Stories.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE DRAGON AWAKES

The dragon emerged from the trees and landed at the edge of the fairy gardens. He was almost as tall as the Fairy Palace. Red scales covered his body and a forked tongue slipped in and out of his sharp teeth. He had two horns and sharp spikes covered his head and traveled down his spine. Two large wings grew out of the dragon's back and a long tail whipped around behind him. Smoke continuously floated out of his enormous nostrils as if they were the exhaust pipes of a steam engine.

Alex and Conner could never have imagined a creature so big. There wasn't a dinosaur or monster they had ever read about that could compare to the beast coming toward them.

The dragon arched his back and roared at the Happily Ever After Assembly. It was so loud many of the windows shattered. All the fairies in the gardens ran or flew to the trees beyond the gardens to avoid being trampled by the creature. General Marquis laughed hysterically at the frightened fairies fleeing their homes.

Conner grabbed his sword from the ground and joined his sister and the men and women at the front of the palace.

"Mother Goose, what do we do?" he asked.

Everyone turned to her.

"Why is everyone looking at me? I've never killed a dragon before!" she said.

"Weren't you and Grandma some of the fairies who hunted them during the Dragon Age?" Alex asked, trying her best not to panic.

"I just wrestled the smaller ones," Mother Goose admitted. "Your grandmother was the one who knew how to slay them."

Conner rubbed his fingers through his hair. "Okay, everyone think! There's got to be a way we can kill this thing!"

General Marquis could feel their anxiety all the way across the gardens. He enjoyed seeing how helpless his new pet made them feel and forced

them to wallow in it for a little longer before ordering it to attack them.

The Masked Man appeared through the trees just below the dragon and had never looked so happy. He gazed up at the dragon as if he were looking at an embodiment of his life's work. He had waited his whole life to possess an actual dragon, and it was bigger and better than he could ever have imagined.

Unfortunately for General Marquis, the Masked Man had more control over the dragon than he realized.

"That's enough waiting," the general shouted. "Send the dragon to attack the Fairy Palace! I want to watch it burn!"

The Masked Man turned his head sharply to the general. "No," he said.

The general rotated his whole body to face him. No one had ever defied him so bluntly before.

"What did you say?" General Marquis asked him.

"I said no, Jacques," the Masked Man said.

He walked toward the general but the dragon stayed right where he was. There was something very different about the Masked Man; he didn't seem as frail or as odd as he usually did. Having possession of the dragon made him stand taller and much more confidently—he didn't have to please anyone anymore.

"I've taken a lot of orders from you recently and I've had enough of it," he barked at the general.

"You work for me!" General Marquis shouted.

The Masked Man burst into laughter. "Now comes the part when I tell you the truth, General," he said. "From the minute I saw you and your men storm into the prison, you started working for *me*. I've waited a long time for someone like you to come my way—someone as power hungry as me but who was blinded by his determination and could be easily manipulated. This whole time you only *thought* I was working for you when actually you were giving me exactly what I wanted. Thank you for your services, General Marquis, but you are no longer valuable to my cause."

The Masked Man was the only person who had ever deceived him. For the first time, the general of the Grande Armée looked *afraid*.

"Don't just stand there! Seize this man!" the general demanded—but the soldiers stayed still. In this moment the man with the dragon was the one they didn't want to cross.

“Wise choice,” the Masked Man said to the soldiers. “Good-bye, General.”

He opened his hands and the soldiers discovered he had kept the shells of the dragon egg. He clutched them very tightly. He raised his hands toward General Marquis and the dragon jerked his head in his direction. The dragon took two steps closer to him and the general tried running away.

“Nooooo!” General Marquis screamed.

The dragon took a deep breath and exhaled a long and powerful fiery geyser from his lungs. The geyser hit the general and he was consumed in its vicious flames. When the dragon stopped, the ground beneath the general had been scorched black and General Marquis was gone.

“What just happened?” Conner shrieked.

“The Masked Man—he has the dragon’s eggshell!” Mother Goose exclaimed. “When a dragon is born and develops its sight, it assumes that whoever it first sees with its eggshell is its mother—meaning whoever holds the pieces of the eggshell becomes the dragon’s master! The Masked Man is in control of the dragon!”

“Oh great,” Conner said. “More good news!”

The Masked Man raised the eggshell pieces toward the Fairy Palace. “Kill them,” he instructed the dragon, and the creature took a step forward. Suddenly, Little Bo Peep emerged from the gardens and put herself in between the dragon and the palace.

“Wait!” Little Bo screamed. *“You don’t have to do this!”*

The Masked Man dropped his hands and the dragon stopped.

After searching the Grande Armée soldiers for hours, Little Bo had finally found the Masked Man. She slowly walked toward him with tears running down her face.

“I know your life has been difficult and unfair and you’ve been tossed aside by your own blood, but I also know there is a loving and caring man under that mask somewhere,” she said. “*That’s* the man I fell in love with! This is your chance to show the rest of the world that you’re not the conniving and revenge-seeking lunatic they think you are—for my sake, show them the man I love so there is still hope we can be together! Don’t ruin the world just because it has ruined you!”

The others watched her with bated breath. They felt their hearts pounding out of their chests. Had her words meant something to him? Did

the Masked Man love her enough to call off the monster? If the Masked Man's face hadn't been covered, they would have seen a very conflicted expression surface as he thought about what Little Bo had said.

But he raised the eggshells toward the palace again. *"Kill them ALL!"* the Masked Man shouted.

Little Bo's pale skin went even whiter. Tears stopped rolling down her cheeks and she stopped breathing altogether. She stared at the Masked Man in a daze and clutched the left side of her chest. Despite her heartfelt appeal, the man she loved more than anything else in world didn't care if she lived or died. With no one else to live for, Little Bo collapsed on the ground and became very still.

Sir Lampton and Xanthous ran to her and carried her back to the others. They laid her down on the steps and Alex and Conner leaned beside her. Conner checked her pulse.

"She's dead," he gasped. The women covered their mouths and the men removed their hats at the news. Even Red was upset to hear it and buried her face in Froggy's shoulder.

Alex pulled Little Bo's necklace out from the top of her dress. She inspected the tiny heart-shaped stone at the end of the chain and saw that a crack had formed across it. Little Bo Peep had died of a broken heart.

The dragon slowly crept toward the Fairy Palace. He scorched the gardens beside him with his fiery breath as he went.

Alex couldn't stand waiting around like a sitting duck for another second. Her grandmother was the only living person who knew how to defeat a dragon—and as long as she was still alive there was a chance she could give them the answer. Alex ran up the front steps and into the Fairy Palace, praying her grandmother could give them a solution before all was lost.

"Alex, where are you—" Conner said, but was distracted before he could finish.

"Look!" Goldilocks yelled.

A herd of unicorns emerged from the forest behind the dragon and circled the enormous creature, preventing the beast from reaching the palace. The herd was led by Rook, who rode Cornelius at the front of the charge. He had returned just in time.

The dragon was agitated by the unexpected obstacle. "Destroy them and

get to the palace!" the Masked Man ordered.

The unicorns stabbed their horns into the dragon's feet and he roared in pain. The dragon picked the unicorns up with his front claws and threw them into the forest in the distance. He kicked Cornelius and he was sent soaring into the gardens with Rook on his back. The dragon grew impatient and scorched the remaining unicorns with his breath. They had only slowed him down—but thankfully they had bought Alex some time.

Inside the palace, Alex raced into the chambers of the Fairy Godmother and fell to her knees at her grandmother's bedside. Even though the fairy-tale world was in the middle of the greatest crisis it had ever faced, the Fairy Godmother slept peacefully as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Grandma, I need you to wake up!" Alex begged. "There's a dragon outside and I don't know how to stop it!"

The dragon's roars shook the chamber and Alex buried her face into her grandmother's mattress until the sound passed.

"Grandma, I know you think I'm ready to be the Fairy Godmother, but I'm not," she cried. "How to defeat a dragon is only one of the many things I still need you to teach me! If there is a little magic left in you, I need you to wake up! We need you more than ever!"

Alex listened for a sound different from that of the chaos outside but didn't hear one. She waited for a whole minute but nothing came. She wiped her tears on the mattress and looked up at her sleeping grandmother —*but her grandmother was gone!*

"Grandma?" Alex asked in astonishment, and looked around the chambers. "*Grandma?*"

She glanced at the nightstand and saw her grandmother's wand was missing, too. The Fairy Godmother had left the room without making a sound.

Once the dragon had dealt with the unicorns, he sped toward the palace. His wings spread out on either side as he went in for the attack.

"What do we do now?" Jack asked the men and women around him.

Conner was the only one to respond. "*Pray,*" he said.

Mother Goose took a giant swig from her flask and walked toward the oncoming dragon. “I’m going to distract it—the rest of you run for the forests!”

“You can’t! You’ll get crushed!” Conner pleaded.

Mother Goose looked back at him. “It’s all right, C-Dog,” she said with sad eyes. “It’s my fault this even happened in the first place—it’s time I took a little responsibility.”

Before she could take another step forward, the dragon roared violently and the sound knocked everyone to their knees. As they helped one another to their feet they heard a familiar voice behind them.

“Step aside, Goose. Slaying dragons was never your cup of tea,” said a woman’s soft and sweet voice. Everyone turned to look at the top of the Fairy Palace’s front steps and couldn’t believe their eyes.

“Grandma?” Conner panted.

The Fairy Godmother had appeared, wearing nothing but her nightgown. “Forgive my appearance; I only just woke a few moments ago and didn’t have time to dress for the occasion,” she apologized.

The dragon stopped in his tracks when he saw the Fairy Godmother. She was the only thing that intimidated him in the slightest—as if it was in his DNA to fear her. He roared at her, knocking everyone back to the ground except for the Fairy Godmother.

She walked barefoot down the steps and into the gardens toward the gigantic beast with her wand ready. Alex ran out of the palace and joined Conner at the front steps. She gasped and dropped to a seated position when she saw what the others were witnessing.

The sight was unbelievable—their tiny grandmother gingerly walked toward a massive fire-breathing dragon as if she were taking a trip to the grocery store.

“Grandma! Wait! You can’t do this!” Conner yelled.

“Grandma, you’re sick! Please come back!” Alex cried after her.

Their grandmother looked at them with a twinkle in her eye. “Don’t worry, children, I still have a little magic left inside me and I couldn’t think of a better way to use it,” she said. “This is going to be fun.”

The men and women, soldiers and fairies, kings and queens, and trolls and goblins watched in disbelief as the old woman walked closer to the dragon. The giant creature screeched at the Fairy Godmother and blew a

fiery geyser in her direction. She blocked it with her wand and the fire was sent in all directions except to the palace behind her.

“You’ve picked the wrong yard to make a mess in,” the Fairy Godmother said to the dragon.

“Don’t just sit there—*destroy her*!” the Masked Man demanded from the other side of the gardens.

The dragon blew his strongest gusts of fiery breath at the old woman, but she blocked every one of them with her wand. The twins clutched each other, terrified they were about to see their grandmother get hurt, but on the contrary, their grandmother laughed as the dragon attempted to harm her.

“The key to slaying a dragon is to always remember you’re much smarter and more powerful than he is,” the Fairy Godmother called to the men and women behind her. “He may seem scary, but he’s really nothing but a large winged reptile with horrid breath.”

A long silvery trail erupted from the tip of the Fairy Godmother’s wand. She happily waved her wand in the air as if she were conducting an orchestra and the trail slashed through the air like a giant whip. The trail grew longer and longer by the second. The dragon jumped back and forth, trying to avoid it. Eventually the trail was so long the dragon tangled himself in it when he tried flying away.

The Fairy Godmother had the dragon exactly where she wanted him. She cracked her wand like a whip again, and the trail that was wrapped around the dragon grew brighter and brighter. The others covered their eyes at the blinding sight and the dragon burst into clumps of ash.

“NOOOOO!” the Masked Man screamed, and the sound echoed throughout the entire kingdom. He turned back to the Grande Armée soldiers with infuriated eyes—it was a face much more frightening than any the general had ever made. “Don’t just stand their gawking at me, you idiots! We need to get out of this kingdom immediately!”

None of the soldiers questioned the Masked Man’s leadership, and they hurried behind him and escaped into the forest before the fairies came after them.

The Fairy Godmother took a deep, satisfied breath and closed her eyes. Her knees gave way and she slowly fell to the ground, landing softly on her back.

“GRANDMA!” the twins shouted in unison. They ran to her side and

propped her head up in their laps.

“Grandma, are you all right?” Conner asked.

“Are you hurt?” Alex asked.

Their grandmother smiled warmly up at them. “I thought I would go out with a bang,” she said weakly. “I knew there was a reason I hadn’t passed on yet, and I’m so glad you got to see your old granny in action before I did.”

“Grandma, that was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen in my life!” Conner said.

“You’re amazing, Grandma,” Alex said. “Please don’t leave us.”

“Leave?” their grandmother said, and she made a funny face at them. “Who said anything about leaving?”

“Aren’t you dying?” Conner asked her softly. “Isn’t that why you wouldn’t get out of bed?”

The Fairy Godmother put her hands on her grandchildren’s faces. “Yes, children, I am dying,” she said. “But what the other fairies didn’t explain is that a fairy never really *dies.* When a fairy’s time is up, his or her soul simply *returns to magic*. They become the very substance that helps the fairies make the world a better place. Even when I’m gone I’ll still be with you both. Every time you wave a wand, or cast a spell, or use an enchantment, I’ll be watching from afar with enough pride to light the sky.”

Tears spilled out of the twins’ eyes and rolled down their faces. Their grandmother’s voice gradually became softer and softer as she spoke. They weren’t sure if this was true or if she was just trying to make them feel better, but they knew it would only be a few moments before she was gone.

“We love you so much, Grandma,” Alex said. “I don’t know what our lives would have been like without you.”

“Boring, that’s for sure,” Conner joked. “You were the most magical grandmother a couple kids could ask for—*literally*! I think you pretty much have that title in the bag.”

The twins saw their grandmother’s trademark smile that wrinkled her eyes appear one last time on her face. It was the same smile as their dad’s, and it was their favorite smile in the whole world.

“I love you, children,” she said. “Take care of each other—and remember, I’ll never be further than a thought away.”

The Fairy Godmother’s eyes closed for the final time. Her body became

weightless in their hands and transformed into hundreds of bright sparkling lights. The lights floated through the air and joined the starry night sky above them.

Alex and Conner had never seen anything like it. Even as she passed away, their grandmother found a way to leave the twins fascinated—perhaps she had indeed returned to magic after all. The twins hugged each other and cried in each other's arms as the sun rose above them. The Fairy Godmother was gone, but the Fairy Kingdom had lived to see another day.

Chapter Thirty

RETURNING TO MAGIC

A beautiful ceremony was held the following night in what was left of the fairy gardens. It celebrated the lives lost during the war and was attended by all the fairies in the Fairy Kingdom and all the citizens who wished to join from the neighboring kingdoms.

Special tributes were paid to Gator, Queen Little Bo Peep, and the Fairy Godmother. Plaques were placed in the gardens bearing Little Bo's and Gator's names and a giant statue of the Fairy Godmother was erected at the front steps of the Fairy Palace. Conner was pleased to see it was an exact likeness of his grandmother, and wasn't made taller or more muscular like the memorial he had envisioned for himself.

The ceremony reminded the twins of their father's funeral, but this time, thankfully, all the attention wasn't on them. They shared this loss with the fairy-tale world and were able to mourn with everyone they knew. The incredible impact their grandmother had left on the Land of Stories could be seen in the eyes of all the people who attended the ceremony. Gratitude radiated from their faces as much as grief.

Everywhere Alex went, people bowed to her and referred to her as the Fairy Godmother. It was going to take her time to get used to it.

Alex asked the kings and queens to stay an extra day so she could hold her first official Happily Ever After Assembly meeting as Fairy Godmother the day after the ceremony. The war was over but there were still so many battles ahead—private and public.

Bree and Emmerich asked Conner and Alex if they could stay for the ceremony but agreed with the twins that they should go home as soon as it was over. They didn't want their parents to worry any more than they already had.

"I am so going to be grounded when I get home." Bree laughed. "Too bad my parents would never believe the truth—they might go easy on me."

"What will you tell them?" Conner asked her.

Bree shrugged. “That I fell in love with a circus clown and followed him around Europe,” she said. “We know it can happen.”

“Would you mind letting my mom and stepdad know where I am?” Conner said. “They’ll probably know already—Alex and I aren’t strangers to going missing now and then.”

“Sure,” Bree said. “Maybe they can talk to my parents and soften the blow of my punishment. They can tell them what a horrible influence you are or something.”

A playful smile appeared on Emmerich’s face. “I bet all the kids in Füssen are so worried about me,” he said. “I’m going to tell them I was kidnapped by secret agents—which isn’t that far from the truth.”

“What will you tell your mom and dad?” Bree asked.

“It’s just my mom and me,” Emmerich said. “I never knew my dad. But when my mother was a little girl my grandfather used to tell her about strange things he had seen in Neuschwanstein Castle. She probably wouldn’t even be too surprised if I told her the truth. I’ll still have to do dishes for months regardless of where I was, but it was worth it! Even though my life was put in danger several times, I’ve never had so much fun!”

“I agree,” Bree said. “This has certainly been the adventure of my life.”

That night Conner, Bree, and Emmerich followed Mother Goose to one of the tallest towers of the Fairy Palace. The circular room was very dusty and cobwebs stretched between walls. Clearly no one had been up there in a very long time. An empty archway was the only thing standing in the tower.

“This was one of the original portals we used to travel into the Otherworld during the heyday of fairy tales,” Mother Goose told them. “Those were the good old days.”

Conner put his arms around Bree and Emmerich. “You know, now that you two have seen the fairy-tale world, it’s your responsibility to help us keep fairy tales alive in the Otherworld,” he said.

Both were excited about the task. Having this responsibility made them feel like they were taking a piece of the Land of Stories back with them.

“I think I’m up for that challenge,” Bree said.

“Me too!” Emmerich said.

Mother Goose pulled a lever on the wall and a transparent blue curtain appeared in the doorway. It was bright on the other side of the curtain and

Conner recognized the zone of light between the two worlds.

“Looks like the old portal is back in action,” Mother Goose declared.

“Where does it lead to?” Emmerich asked.

“Somewhere in the Netherlands,” Mother Goose said but then second-guessed herself. “Or was it Nevada? Oh well, just ask someone once you get there. Let’s make this quick. I’m not getting any younger despite the potions I drink.”

Conner hugged his friends a bittersweet good-bye.

“Thank you both so much for helping me get here,” he said. “I promise to visit you once we get everything straightened out here.”

“I’ll miss you, Herr Bailey,” Emmerich said. He didn’t want to leave.

“Take care, bud,” Conner said.

Emmerich was first to step through the curtain and disappear into the Otherworld. Bree lingered by the archway before following him. Just saying *good-bye* didn’t seem good enough.

“I’ll see you around” was all she mustered.

“Yeah, definitely,” Conner said, and looked around the tower as he blushed.

Bree kissed his cheek and stepped toward the portal. Conner was feeling a little daring since he knew he wouldn’t be seeing her anytime soon, so he decided to send her off with a secret.

“Hey, Bree,” he said. “Before you go, there’s something I’ve wanted to tell you.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

Conner scrunched his whole face as he told her. “After a lot of thought and self-reflection, I’ve come to the conclusion that I might—possibly—maybe—*do* have a crush on you,” he admitted.

Bree laughed. “I know you do,” she said. “And by the way, *I have a crush on you, too.*” She winked at him and quickly stepped through the curtain before either of them could say another word.

Conner’s mouth dropped open and his heart felt like it was going to flutter out of his chest. He was happy and confused at the same time. If they both liked each other, *what happened next?* It was an electrifying yet misery-inducing mystery and Conner didn’t know what to do with himself.

Mother Goose turned the lever and faced Conner with a very serious expression in her eyes. “C-Dog, I’ve got to talk to you.”

“I know,” Conner said bashfully. “I don’t know how to talk to girls—but in my defense, Bree is the first girl I ever met that I understood whatsoever!”

She stared at him peculiarly. “Puppy love has nothing to do with what I’m about to say,” she said. “It’s about the portal in Neuschwanstein Castle the three of you traveled through. There was a minor detail I forgot to mention when I was telling you about it.”

“What’s that?” he asked, trying to think of what she could be referring to. “We were stuck in it for a couple days but once the portal opened all the way we got here pretty smoothly.”

“That’s the thing—you weren’t meant to,” Mother Goose explained. “I told the Brothers Grimm to lead the Grande Armée into the Bavarian portal because I had bewitched it. I enchanted it so only someone of magic blood could travel through it easily. Any mortal traveling through it would be stuck inside for two hundred years; that’s how we trapped the Grande Armée. You would have traveled here without a hitch, but if Bree and Emmerich were mortal they would still be in it.”

Conner’s eyes blinked rapidly as he wrapped his head around what she was saying. “Are you telling me that Bree and Emmerich have magic in their blood?”

“That’s the only explanation,” she said. “Although I don’t know how it’s possible.”

Conner thought for a moment. An answer surfaced in his mind, based on all the information he had acquired during their journey.

“Wait, the lion statue told us you transferred some of your blood into Wilhelm Grimm’s so he could play the panpipe and access the portal,” he said.

“That’s right,” she said.

“Then is it possible Bree and Emmerich are descendants of Wilhelm Grimm?” he asked.

Mother Goose nodded as she pondered the conclusion. “Anything is possible,” she said.

It was mind-boggling. Magic always worked in mysterious ways but it was astonishing that Conner had somehow crossed paths with the two people out of billions in the Otherworld who had magic in their blood. Bree and Emmerich must have been destined from birth to find the Land of

Stories, just as Alex and Conner were.

“But if they’re not related to Wilhelm Grimm, I wonder how else magic became a part of their DNA,” Mother Goose said. “Someone else may have slipped between dimensions undetected in the past… but who?”

Alex walked through the halls of the Fairy Palace alone. It had been a very long and sad day and she desperately wanted to find a place she could be by herself. Regardless of her quest, Alex was faced with unwanted company when someone popped out from behind a pillar and startled her.

“Hello, Alex,” Rook said.

He was the last person she wanted to see. “What are you doing here?”

“I snuck into the palace to see you,” he told her. He adjusted his right arm, which was in a sling. He had received an injury fighting the dragon with the unicorns.

“I heard about you and the unicorns,” Alex said. “How is Cornelius?”

“He’s fine,” Rook said. “He chipped his horn in the fall but you can’t really tell.”

“It was very brave of you and I’m thankful,” she said. “There’s a witch named Hagetta in the Dwarf Forests. Take your father to her. Tell her I sent you and she’ll heal both of your wounds—but I can’t help you anymore. I meant what I said in the gardens, I don’t want to see you again.”

She continued down the hall and Rook limped after her. Apparently he had sprained his ankle in the fall, too, but Alex didn’t trust him enough to believe his injuries were genuine.

“I know I broke your trust, but I did it to save my father and the other villagers,” Rook said. “You have to understand I had no choice.”

Alex quickly turned back to him. “I know someday I’ll understand that,” she said. “But there is always a choice, and as the Fairy Godmother I’ll *always* have to make the most difficult ones—who to help and who not to help, whose life to save and whose life not to save, which kingdom to protect and which kingdom not to protect. Those are the terrible decisions I have to make and it’s a burden I shouldn’t expect you to carry with me. I can’t blame you for making choices I wouldn’t. I can’t share that

responsibility with you, and that responsibility is my *life*."

"So that's it, then," Rook said sadly. "After all the wonderful talks and walks we've shared, one bump in the road comes along and we call it quits?"

"It's not a bump, it's a fork," Alex said. "We'll never be able to stay on the same path—it wouldn't be fair to either of us. I'm sorry."

She walked briskly down the hall from him so he couldn't keep up. Rook called after her but she didn't look back.

"I'll change your mind one day, Alex!" he cried. "That's a promise!"

Alex pushed through two heavy doors and walked into the Hall of Dreams. She knew she would find privacy there. She sat down on the invisible floor and looked out at all the bright orbs representing people's hopes and dreams. Unfortunately, the endless room wasn't as full as it had been when her grandmother showed it to her. Many people had been disheartened during the last few days, and their hopes and dreams were casualties of war.

A knock came from the other side of the doors.

"I said I didn't want to see you anymore!" Alex shouted.

Conner poked his head inside. "Jeez, sorry!"

"No, wait, Conner! I'm so sorry!" she apologized. "I thought you were someone else."

Conner had come to find his sister to tell her what he had learned about Bree and Emmerich, but he was so captivated by the Hall of Dreams he completely forgot what he was going to say. He shut the doors behind him and sat next to her.

"What is this place?" Conner asked.

"It's called the Hall of Dreams," Alex said. "It keeps a record of every hope and dream of every person and creature in the world."

"Neat," he said. "It's like a big fairy database."

"It used to be much fuller but I'm afraid the war discouraged a lot of people and they stopped believing," she said. "It's my job to restore that belief now that Grandma's gone."

"You mean it's *our* job," Conner said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Alex looked at him in confusion. "What do you mean you're not going anywhere? What about the Otherworld?"

"It'll still be there waiting for me," Conner said. "But right now my job

is being here with you. I know you're worried about being the Fairy Godmother so I'm going to stay with you until you're comfortable enough to be on your own. Besides, I don't want to go home until Mom and Bob have forgotten about how much money I withdrew with my credit card."

Alex smiled. It was the sweetest thing her brother could do for her.

"You mean it?" She wasn't even going to pretend for a second she wasn't pleased and relieved to hear this.

"Absolutely," Conner said. "We're sort of unstoppable when we're together—and there's still a lot of work to be done here."

"All right," she said. "But on one condition."

He was afraid to ask. "What's that?"

"*You* have to be *my* apprentice," she said. "Every Fairy Godmother needs one."

Conner grunted. "Oh come on, Alex! Let's not get carried away," he moaned.

"Just think about it, Conner," she said excitedly. "I can teach you spells, how to make enchantments, and how to grant wishes! And if anything should ever happen to me, the Land of Stories would fall into your hands, just as it should."

He rolled his eyes and made a face like it was the worst idea in the world. "Fine," he said. "But I will not be called *the next Fairy Godmother*."

"You can choose whatever title you want." She was so excited by the idea she didn't care what he wanted to be called.

Conner thought about it for a moment. "I want to be called *the Head Fairy Dude*."

Alex smiled and nodded. "I can live with that," she said. "*Conner Bailey, Head Fairy Dude*—it has a nice ring to it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE DAWNING

The following day the entire Happily Ever After Assembly gathered in the main hall of the Fairy Palace. All seven fairies stood nobly behind their podiums, Mother Goose sat in her chair across from Alex, and the kings and queens stood on the floor before them. Jack, Goldilocks, and Trollbella had also been asked to attend the meeting, although none of them knew what for. They figured Alex had something up her sleeve.

The Fairy Godmother's seat remained in the hall by Alex's request—she wasn't ready for it to be moved. Every time she looked at the chair she imagined her grandmother sitting there smiling back at her. It inspired Alex and kept her motivated to continue her grandmother's work.

"Looks like we're all here," Mother Goose told the room after conducting a head count. "Shall the meeting proceed?"

"Not yet," Alex said. "We're still waiting for one person to arrive."

No one but Alex knew who they were waiting for. The rest of the hall joined her as she looked upward. Their curiosity increased with every moment that passed. Two giant swans appeared in the sky and descended into the hall. Empress Elvina rode one of the swans while two elf soldiers escorted her on the other.

The assembly exchanged wide-eyed glances as if they were looking at a ghost—the majority of them had never seen her in person before. The elf soldiers dismounted their swan and helped the empress down from the other. It was the first time in hundreds of years that elves had touched fairy soil.

"Thank you so much for coming to our meeting, Empress," Alex said with a cordial bow.

"I was very surprised to receive an invitation since I didn't fulfill my end of our agreement," the empress said.

"I'm just glad you and your elves are safe," Alex said.

The empress and her soldiers stood apart from everyone else in the hall.

She was the tallest person in the room and glared at the other monarchs. The elves hadn't come with the intention of making friends.

"I just love your branches," Snow White said, trying to break the ice.

Empress Elvina stared at her as if the compliment was a horrible insult. "This is the sacred crown worn by every ruler of the Elf Empire since the Dragon Age," she stated as if it were obvious.

"Well, it's just lovely," Cinderella added.

Now that everyone had finally arrived, Alex began the assembly meeting.

"I've called you all here today to make an announcement," Alex said. "I've decided my first act as the new Fairy Godmother will be to abolish the Happily Ever After Assembly."

The hall immediately erupted in protest. Empress Elvina was the only one not surprised by the news and she found the others' reactions very amusing. It was the first time in a great while that the elves were in the know before the humans.

"Have you lost your mind?" Tangerina asked.

"I think you need a vacation, kiddo," Mother Goose said.

Xanthous tried reasoning with her. "Alex, we've stood behind you on every decision but this is one we can't support."

"Everyone calm down and hear me out," she said. "My grandmother formed the Happily Ever After Assembly as a way of uniting the world, but as the Grande Armée proved, the world is far from being united. The war wasn't the last threat we'll face. We have to be prepared for whatever the future may bring and we can't do that if some of us are left out of the conversation. So today, I am founding the Happily Forever After Assembly, and I'm asking the troblins and the elves to join us."

The hall went very quiet but no one objected. The men and women looked back and forth between the troll queen and the elf empress, waiting to see how they would react to the offer.

"You want the *troblins* to join?" Trollbella asked in shock.

"Yes," Alex said. "Your people come from a long line of horrible behavior and you've done a wonderful job of restoring their dignity, Trollbella. However, the trolls and goblins will never respect us if we don't respect them, too. I learned very valuable lessons from two unlikely teachers over the course of the war—one was a prisoner and the other was a

witch. They taught me that every creature is an individual and we can't punish an entire race for mistakes made by individuals. As easy as it is to label large groups with the reputations of their ancestors, it isn't right. As we forgive the trolls and goblins, I hope the elves can forgive the humans and fairies for the treatment they have received from the fairies in the past."

"Our agreement wasn't based on *forgiveness*," Empress Elvina said. "But it was a very gracious gesture on the fairies' part to assist us during the Grande Armée's attack, and we are grateful. If this new assembly will benefit future generations of elves, then we will gladly join it."

A smile came to Alex's face. The fairies around her were stunned that she had convinced the elf empress to join forces with them.

"Are we all in agreement, then?" Alex asked the room. She made eye contact with every ruler and fairy in the hall and each nodded.

"I believe we are," Emerelda announced. "Let today mark the dawning of the Happily Forever After Assembly."

The hall burst into a round of applause. Even the empress couldn't resist clapping. Trollbella was so excited by the union she did a cartwheel. Alex had secured a very promising future for the fairy-tale world.

Jack cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but we're still wondering why we were called here."

"That leads me to my second order of business," Alex said. "The majority of the criminals the Grande Armée recruited fled from battle, which means more criminals are at large throughout the kingdoms than ever before, not to mention the remaining Armée soldiers that escaped. We need to work together to round them up and put them behind bars. With the assembly's permission, I would like to ask Jack and Goldilocks to form a team to track these criminals down."

Jack and Goldilocks looked at each other.

"Us?" Jack asked.

"But we *are* criminals," Goldilocks said.

"Which makes you the perfect candidates," Alex said. "You think like criminals—you know where they'll hide and who they'll make alliances with."

"We'll have to think about it," Jack said, speaking on their behalf. "Recently we've been toying with the idea of settling down."

This was news to Goldilocks. "When did we have that conversation?"

she asked her husband.

“Well, I just assumed, because—” He raised his eyebrows suggestively so she knew he was thinking of their unborn child without saying it aloud.

Goldilocks smiled at him and held his hand. “Just because a bird builds a nest doesn’t mean its wings are clipped,” she said, and then quickly turned to Alex. “*We’re in.* Jack and I want this world to be a better place as much as the rest of you do. Besides, it will allow us to live our lives much like we always have, except we’ll be acting for the greater good instead of for ourselves.”

“I agree,” Jack said. They had both gained a sudden interest in the future, knowing they were bringing a child into the world. “We accept your offer.”

“Then I would recommend the first person you track down is the Masked Man,” Mother Goose said. “There is no limit to his ruthlessness or his greed—he tried stealing from the Fairy Godmother herself. I bet he’s out plotting his next strike against the fairies even as we speak.”

“Mother Goose, what did the Masked Man try to steal from her?” Alex asked. “Surely Grandma didn’t have a dragon egg in her possession.”

Mother Goose shook her head. “I’m afraid I don’t know, but it was enough to have him put behind bars for life.”

“We’ll get together a team at once and track him down,” Goldilocks said.

Unfortunately, the Masked Man was much closer than they all realized.

With nothing further to discuss, Alex concluded the first Happily Forever After Assembly meeting. She waved her wand and several more large swans appeared and took the kings and queens home to their own kingdoms.

Alex was completely drained after the meeting and desperately needed some time to rest and decompress. Rather than going back to her own chambers, she decided to go to her grandmother’s instead. Soon her grandmother’s old room would become hers and Alex wanted to spend a little time in it before it was changed.

The door was already ajar when Alex got there.

“That’s odd,” she said to herself. She hoped her things hadn’t been moved to the chambers already.

Alex went inside and her grandmother’s scent greeted her at the door.

She was happy to see all of her grandmother's belongings were still there. Alex gazed around the chambers at her grandmother's things. She looked forward to going through them with her brother, and wondered what they would learn about her as they searched through her spell books and organized her cabinet of potions.

When Alex's eyes landed on the cabinet of potions she was confronted with an alarming sight. All the drawers were open and had been rummaged through. Broken glass bottles covered the floor around it—someone had searched it in a hurry. The cabinet door was still swinging—*whoever it was was still here.*

Alex raised her wand and cautiously moved about the chambers. "Who's in here?" she demanded.

She scanned the room though it appeared empty. But Alex's gut told her she wasn't alone.

Alex searched every corner of the room but didn't find a soul. The only place she hadn't looked was behind her grandmother's desk on top of the platform in the back. Her heart beat faster and faster as she approached it.

"Show yourself!" she ordered. "This is a private room and you don't belong in here!"

A tall and menacing figure suddenly jumped up from behind the desk. Before Alex could identify the Masked Man, he roared at her and shoved the desk in her direction. It toppled down the platform steps toward her and shattered on the floor—she barely avoided it crashing on her. He ran toward the door but Alex pointed her wand at it and it slammed shut.

"Freeze!" she yelled. "Don't move or I'll blast you into next week!"

The Masked Man raised his arms with his back to her. She noticed a small blue bottle dangling from one of his hands.

"So you're the new Fairy Godmother," he said. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"What did you steal?" Alex asked.

"I didn't *steal* anything."

"Then what's in your hand?"

"Something that was *owed* me a long time ago," the Masked Man snarled.

"Turn around!" Alex ordered.

The Masked Man slowly turned to face her. There was something very

familiar about the pale blue eyes behind his mask—she could have sworn she had seen those eyes before.

“Take off that ridiculous disguise,” Alex said, and gripped her wand even tighter.

“You don’t want me to do that,” the Masked Man said in a playful tone.

“Now!” she yelled.

The Masked Man reluctantly pulled off the sack over his head and exposed his face for the first time in over a decade. Alex gasped and dropped her wand. She was right—they had met before.

Conner, Froggy, and Red stood on the grand balcony watching the sun set over the gardens. The fairies across the lawns cleaned and restored the damage their homes had received during the battle.

“Even though more than half of the gardens were destroyed, the gardens are still beautiful,” Red said dreamily. “I would love to plant my own garden just below the balcony of my bedroom at the castle—” She suddenly grew very sad and stopped herself from finishing the thought. “Oh silly me, I keep forgetting I’m homeless now.”

“Have you thought about what you want to do now that you aren’t queen anymore?” Conner asked.

“Besides becoming a recluse like the Snow Queen as I wait for someone to restore my throne?” Red said. “No, I’m afraid not. Although I hear Queen Sleeping Beauty is in the market for a nanny.”

Froggy put his arm around her. “You’ll come home with me to the Charming Kingdom,” he said. “I can’t offer you a kingdom, but I’m sure I can arrange for you to have a private garden all to yourself.”

Red sighed at the idea. “I suppose that will have to do. It could be a lot worse—I’d rather be an evicted queen than a dead one. Poor Little Bo Peep, I almost feel guilty for saying all those horrible things about her.”

A carriage traveled through the gardens toward the palace. They didn’t pay any special attention to it until it got closer and they saw the passenger riding inside of it.

“That’s the third Little Pig!” Conner said and pointed to the carriage.

“What’s that brick-obsessed runt doing here?” Red asked.

“Let’s find out,” Froggy said. He led Red and Conner through the Fairy Palace and they met the third Little Pig on the front steps.

“Hello, Your Majesty,” the third Little Pig said, and graciously bowed. “It’s so good to see you again.”

“Cut to the chase, piggy, what are you doing here?” Red asked, crossing her arms. He had been the bearer of bad news lately and she wasn’t looking forward to hearing why he had come to them.

“The Bo Peep Republic is still mourning the tragic death of the queen, but a new election was held yesterday afternoon and I’ve come here to tell you the results,” he said happily.

Red couldn’t be less interested. “I wonder what baboon they replaced Little Bo with—they deserve whatever oaf they put on the throne—” She suddenly stopped talking and her eyes grew so large they took up half her face. “Wait one moment; did you just address me as *Your Majesty*?”

Froggy and Conner shared an excited smile. Red’s hands started shaking and she jumped up and down. Had all her dreams come true? Had her people given her back the throne?

“Was Red re-elected queen?” Conner asked.

“Yes, am I the baboon? Am I the oaf they deserve?” she asked as she anxiously bounced.

“No, ma’am,” the third Little Pig said. “I was speaking to Prince Charlie.”

Froggy turned a pale shade of green. “Me?” he asked. “I was elected?”

“Him?” Red said, just as shocked as he was.

“Yes, sir,” the pig said. “Congratulations, you’ve been elected king. Little Bo hadn’t named a successor and there wasn’t time for any candidates to properly run, so the citizens were given fill-in ballots. Your name was written down the most.”

Conner gave a hearty chuckle and patted his friend on the back. “Way to go, King Froggy!”

Froggy was speechless. His pupils almost disappeared into his big glossy eyes. He turned around and looked guiltily at Red.

“My dear, I’m so sorry,” he said. “I feel as if I’ve stolen something from you.”

“Are you *kidding*?” Red said. “This is fantastic news! Do you know

what this means?”

“You’ll be secretly plotting my death now?” Froggy asked with a gulp.

Red laughed with delight. “No, Charlie!” she said with a gigantic smile. “This means I’ll be queen again! *Once we’re married, that is.*”

Froggy shook his head, positive he had misheard her. “Come again?” he peeped.

“Did you guys get engaged and not tell us?” Conner asked.

“Not to my knowledge,” Froggy said, and stared at Red, horribly confused. “Was that a proposal, my love?”

“It was if it makes me queen again!” Red said, throwing her arms around him. “Oh, Charlie, our wedding will be beautiful! We’ll have it right after your coronation in the new gardens you plant for me at the castle! It’s so funny how life works out sometimes, isn’t it?”

Froggy glanced at Conner with a fearful look on his face—his life had just taken a very unexpected and frightening turn.

The celebration was cut short when a cannon was fired in the distance. They all dove to the ground just in time to miss the cannonball that blew the front steps of the palace into smithereens. When the dust had cleared, Conner got to his feet and looked toward the edge of the gardens. A few dozen Grande Armée soldiers left over from the war, led by Colonel Rembert, were attacking the Fairy Palace.

“We’re being attacked again!” Conner yelled.

“Again?” Red squealed.

Xanthous and Skylene emerged from the palace and climbed down the destroyed steps to where Conner and the others were.

“What’s going on?” Xanthous asked.

“The Grande Armée soldiers have returned!” Conner said.

“How many of them are there?” Skylene asked.

“Not too many,” he said. “Only a couple dozen or so.”

The fairies looked across the gardens as another cannonball was fired in their direction. Xanthous shot a fiery burst out of his finger and the cannonball was destroyed in midair.

“Skylene and I will handle this,” Xanthous told Conner. “Tell everyone inside the palace not to panic.”

The fairies ran through the gardens toward the soldiers. Conner helped Froggy, Red, and the third Little Pig to their feet.

“A few dozen soldiers hardly seem large enough for a proper attack,” Froggy said.

“I know,” Conner agreed. “It’s more like a *distraction.*” His heart suddenly fell into the pit of his stomach. “Oh no, that’s exactly what this is! The Masked Man is back! I’ve got to find my sister!”

Conner climbed up the ruined front steps of the palace and darted inside. He was like a fish swimming upstream as all the fairies inside made their way out to see what was causing the commotion. He raced up the stairs but didn’t find his sister in her chambers. He tried his grandmother’s room next, and burst through the door.

The first thing Conner noticed was the desk lying in pieces on the floor and the broken glass surrounding the potions cabinet. Alex was sitting on the steps of the platform in the back of the room. Her face was ghostly white and she panted as she stared off into space. Her wand was on the floor a few feet away from her—something was very wrong.

“Alex, are you all right?” Conner asked, and ran to her side. “What the heck happened in here?”

She was trembling and didn’t make eye contact with him. *“The M-m-masked M-m-man was here,”* she stuttered.

“Did he hurt you?” Conner asked.

Alex shook her head. *“He—he—he stole a potion. I—I—I caught him and made him take off his m-m-mask!”*

“And what happened?”

“I—I—I saw his face!” Alex shrieked. Tears spilled out of her eyes.

“What was wrong with it?” Conner asked. “Alex, you’re scaring me! Tell me what you saw!”

She turned to her brother and looked him directly in the eyes. He had never seen her so petrified.

“Conner,” she gasped. *“The Masked Man—it was Dad!”*

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Contents

COVER

TITLE PAGE

WELCOME

DEDICATION

EPIGRAPH

PROLOGUE: GUESTS OF THE GRANDE ARMÉE

CHAPTER ONE: AN EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

CHAPTER TWO: THE HALL OF DREAMS

CHAPTER THREE: THE BOOK HUGGERS

CHAPTER FOUR: A WEDDING IN THE WOODS

CHAPTER FIVE: INSIGHT AT THE GRAVE SITE

CHAPTER SIX: QUEEN RED'S HOUSE OF PROGRESS

CHAPTER SEVEN: LITTLE BO PEEPING

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE FAIRY INAUGURAL BALL

CHAPTER NINE: ABANDON TRIP

CHAPTER TEN: THE SOUTH BANK LION

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE LUMIÈRE DES ETOILES CASINO

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE SECRETS OF NEUSCHWANSTEIN CASTLE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE EVICTED QUEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE ARMÉE ARRIVES

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: A BITTERSWEET REUNION

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE MASKED MAN OF PINOCCHIO PRISON

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE ONLY WITNESS

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: SENDING THE SWANS

CHAPTER NINETEEN: AN ICY TRADE

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE GREAT TROBLIN LAKE

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: FROM THE ASHES

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: TO THE CORE

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: THE ELF EMPIRE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE FORGOTTEN ARMY

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: THE HEALING FLAMES OF HAGETTA'S FIRE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: FEEDING THE CREATURE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: THE SIGNAL IN THE SKY

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE BATTLE FOR THE FAIRY KINGDOM

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: THE DRAGON AWAKES

CHAPTER THIRTY: RETURNING TO MAGIC

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: THE DAWNING

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The Land of Stories

Beyond the Kingdoms

CHRIS COLFER

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Begin Reading

Table of Contents

Copyright Page

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To my parents, for always loving and supporting me. There wasn't a parenting book in the world that could have prepared you for my eccentricity. I'm sorry for denting the coffee table with my ninja swords. Yes, it was me.

“BOOKS ARE A UNIQUELY PORTABLE MAGIC.”

—STEPHEN KING

PROLOGUE

THE OTHER SON

1845 Copenhagen, Denmark

In the cozy study of his home, Hans Christian Andersen was busy writing at his desk.

"High up on a tree, taller than all the steeples in all the land, a lonely little bird awoke in her nest," he read aloud as he wrote the first sentence of his newest story. The soft scratches of his quill came to a halt and the author scratched his head.

"Wait, *why* is the bird asleep?" he asked himself. "Wouldn't she wake at dawn with the other birds? She may appear lazy and unrespectable if not. I want the readers to like her."

Hans crumpled up the piece of parchment and tossed it into the pile of previous drafts on the floor. He retrieved a new quill, hoping a darker and longer feather would rejuvenate his storytelling.

"High up on a tree, taller than all the steeples in all the land, a lonely little bird was building herself a nest…" He stopped himself again. "No, if she's building a nest, the readers will wonder if she's about to lay eggs, and then they'll think the story is about an unwed mother. The church will accuse me of alluding to something unholy… *again.*"

He crumpled it up and tossed it with the other attempts.

"High up on a tree, taller than all the steeples in all the land, a lonely little bird searched the ground for worms…" Hans covered his eyes and groaned. "No, no, no! What am I thinking? I can't start the story like this. If I say the tree is taller than the steeples, some imbecile will think I'm comparing the tree to God himself, and make an unnecessary fuss."

The author sighed and tossed his latest effort aside. Being a writer in a nineteenth-century society could get frustrating at times.

The grandfather clock near his desk chimed as it struck six o'clock.

Hans stood for the first time in a few hours. “I think it’s time for a walk,” he said.

Hans took his coat and top hat off the rack by the front door and left his home. He was easily recognizable to the other pedestrians as he walked down the street. After a quick glance of his prominent nose and thin stature, there was no denying the famed author was among them. Hans politely tipped his hat to those who gawked at him and then hurried away before they bothered him.

Eventually, Hans arrived at the Langelinie promenade and had a seat on his favorite bench. The Øresund water ahead sparkled in the remaining daylight. He took a deep breath of salty air and his mind relaxed for the first time all day.

This was Hans’s favorite spot to decompress. Whenever his head was filled with too many ideas to concentrate, or empty of all imagination, a simple walk to the promenade always took the edge off. If he was lucky, he would find inspiration in the land and waters to take home. And occasionally, if he was *really* lucky, the inspiration would find *him.*

“Hello, Mr. Andersen,” said a soft voice behind him.

He looked over his shoulder and was delighted to see an old friend. She wore light blue robes that sparkled like the night sky. She was very warm and welcoming, but a stranger to everyone in Denmark except for Hans.

“My dear Fairy Godmother, it’s good to see you,” Hans said with a large grin.

The Fairy Godmother sat beside him. “You as well,” she said. “You weren’t at home, so I figured I would find you here. Are you having trouble writing this evening?”

“Unfortunately so,” Hans said. “Some days words flow through me like the Nile, and other days I’m as dry as the Sahara. I’m afraid you’ve caught me in the middle of a drought, but I’m confident rain shall fall again.”

“I have no doubt,” the Fairy Godmother said. “I’ve actually come to congratulate you. We’ve just heard the news that your fairy tales are being published in other countries. The other fairies and I couldn’t be happier. You’ve been very successful in helping us spread the tales of our world. We’re very grateful.”

“I’m the grateful one,” Hans said. “When you found me as a young man, at that terrible school in Elsinore, I was ready to give up writing for good.

The stories you gave me to craft as my own inspired me as much as the children they were intended for. I wouldn't have found my way back to storytelling if it weren't for you."

"You give us too much credit," she said. "You knew exactly how to adapt our stories for the current times by adding elements of religion. Otherwise, the societies of today may not have embraced them. 'The Ugly Duckling,' 'The Snow Queen,' 'The Little Mermaid,' and the other tales would have been forgotten, but you've immortalized them."

"Speaking of, how are things in the fairy-tale world?" Hans asked.

"Very well," the Fairy Godmother said. "We've entered quite the golden age. My darling Cinderella married Prince Chance of the Charming Kingdom. Princess Sleeping Beauty was finally awoken from the awful sleeping curse. Snow White replaced her evil stepmother as queen of the Northern Kingdom. Not since the dragons went extinct has there been such cause for celebration."

"But, my dear, I asked you the same question almost a decade ago and that was your exact answer then," Hans said. "Even as a child I was being told the same stories. The fairy-tale world must be frozen in time."

"If only," she said with a laugh. "This world moves so much faster than ours, but one day, I'm confident the worlds will move as one. I don't know how or why, I just have faith they will."

They enjoyed the soothing sights and sounds of the promenade. An elderly couple leisurely strolled close to the water. A small dog chased seagulls twice its size. A father and his sons flew a kite in the field nearby, while the mother cradled their newborn daughter. The boys giggled as the breeze blew the kite higher and higher into the air.

"Hans?" the Fairy Godmother said. "Can you remember what made you happy when you were a young boy?"

It didn't take him long to remember. "Places like this promenade," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's a place of unlimited possibility," he said. "At any moment, anyone or anything could appear. A parade could march through the field, a flock of birds from a tropical land could fly across the skies, or a king from a distant country could sail through the waters on a massive ship. I suppose any child is happiest wherever his imagination is stimulated."

“Interesting,” she said.

Hans could tell from the look in her eyes that something was weighing heavily on her mind. And if her question was any indication, it was about a child.

“Forgive me,” Hans said. “I’ve known you for so long, I’m embarrassed to ask, but do you have children?”

“I do,” she said, and smiled at the thought. “I have two sons. Both are the spitting image of my late husband. John is the oldest—he’s a very happy and adventurous child. He’s constantly making new friends and finding new places to explore. Everyone is very fond of him back home.”

The Fairy Godmother went quiet suddenly. “And your other son?” Hans asked.

As if she had suddenly sprung an emotional leak, all the happiness drained from the Fairy Godmother’s face. Her smile faded and she looked down at her hands. “His name is Lloyd. He’s a few years younger than John, and very… *different.*”

“I see,” Hans said. It was obviously a very sore topic.

“You must forgive me,” she said with a long sigh. “I can’t hide the frustration anymore. My life’s work is about providing people with keys to happiness, but no matter what I do, I can’t seem to unlock my son’s.”

“He’s having a difficult time, I take it?” Hans didn’t mean to pry, but he had never seen the Fairy Godmother so visibly helpless.

“Yes—although I don’t think it’s a phase,” she said.

Once she started on the subject it was hard to stop, but Hans was eager to hear about it. He put a comforting hand on her shoulder and the floodgates opened.

“This may be an awful thing to say about my own child, but when my husband died I think something broke inside of Lloyd,” the Fairy Godmother confessed. “It’s as if his ability to be happy died with my husband—I haven’t seen him smile since he was a baby. He likes to be alone and hates socializing. He barely speaks, and when he does, it’s never more than a word or so. He couldn’t be more different from John. He just seems so miserable and I’m afraid it may last forever.”

A single tear rolled down the Fairy Godmother’s face. She retrieved a handkerchief from the pocket of her robes and dabbed her eyes.

“There must be something he enjoys,” Hans said. “Does he have any

interests?”

The Fairy Godmother had to think about it. “Reading,” she said with a nod. “He reads constantly, especially literature from this world. It’s the only thing that appeals to him, but I’m not altogether sure he actually *enjoys* it.”

Hans thought it over. Entertaining children had always been his strong suit, not fixing them. He imagined himself in Lloyd’s shoes and thought of something that might get a rise out of him.

“Perhaps *reading* isn’t enough,” he said, and his face lit up with a grin. “If books are what he’s interested in, maybe there’s a way to expand the passion.”

“What do you mean?”

Hans explained. “When I was an up-and-coming writer, I was given a grant by the Danish king to travel across Europe. I traveled all over Scandinavia, through Italy and Switzerland, to England, and back again. I cannot describe in words how exhilarating it was to see with my own eyes all the places I had only read about. Words never did justice to the wonders I saw. It left a smile on my heart.”

The Fairy Godmother wasn’t sure what he was getting at. “John loves this world, too, but Lloyd refuses to leave his room whenever I invite him to come along.”

Hans raised a finger. “Then try inviting him into a world that *does* appeal to him,” he suggested. “What if you took him into the story of one of his books? He may only be mildly interested in what he reads, but if he actually *saw* the places he spends so much time reading about, I’m sure you’d get his smile back.”

The Fairy Godmother looked out at the sea as if the answer to a long-standing mystery had sailed in. “But am I capable of such magic?” she asked, almost in a trance. “I can travel between realms that already exist, but how could I *create* them? How could I bring the written word to life?”

Hans looked around the promenade to make sure only the Fairy Godmother could hear what he was about to say. “Maybe you won’t have to *create* anything,” he said. “What if every story ever told was just a realm waiting to be discovered? Perhaps happiness isn’t the only thing you were meant to provide keys for.”

The thought was so enticing and so exciting, the Fairy Godmother was almost afraid of its potential. What if she could travel into any story as

easily as the fairy-tale world and the Otherworld? What if she had the power to turn any book into a portal?

“It’s getting late,” Hans said about the ever darkening skies around them. “Would you like to join me for a cup of tea? This conversation reminds me so much of another story I’ve been working on called ‘The Story of a Mother—’”

He looked back at the Fairy Godmother, but she had vanished into thin air. Hans couldn’t help but laugh at her sudden departure. His idea must have been good if she couldn’t wait another moment to explore it.

The following weeks were the busiest of the Fairy Godmother’s life. She locked herself inside her chambers at the Fairy Palace and worked around the clock. As if she were inventing a new recipe, she searched for components to carefully combine that would make Hans’s idea a reality. She read all the books of spells, books of potions, and books of enchantments in her possession. She studied dark magic, white magic, and the history of magic.

She slowly patched her creation together, one element at a time, like sewing a quilt. She kept a journal of her progress, frequently referencing it so she didn’t make the same mistake twice. Finally, after she discovered the correct ingredients and stirred them together and let the mixture sit under moonlight for a fortnight, her concoction was complete. She poured the potion into a small blue bottle.

As with any experiment, the Fairy Godmother needed a good test subject. She retrieved Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* from the bookshelf and placed it on the floor. She opened it to the first page and cautiously poured three drops of the potion onto it, one drop at a time.

As soon as the third drop made contact, the book illuminated like a gigantic spotlight. A bright beam of white light shined out of the book, and since there was no ceiling, it shined directly into the night sky. It could be seen miles away from the palace.

The Fairy Godmother was so eager to see if the potion had worked, she lost all sense of caution. She clutched her wand and stepped straight into the beam of light. She was no longer standing in her chambers at the Fairy

Palace, but in a world of *words*.

Everywhere she looked, she saw written text spinning, bouncing, and hovering around her. The Fairy Godmother thought she recognized some of the words from familiar passages in the book. She watched in amazement as the words spread out into a vast space surrounding her. They morphed into the shapes of the objects they described, gained texture, and soon created a world around her.

She was now standing in a dark forest of spindly trees. The *Frankenstein* book and the beam of light emitting from it were the only things that had traveled with her into the peculiar forest. She leaned back through the light and saw her chambers on the other side—*the beam was a portal!* She only hoped it had taken her to where she intended.

A flash of lightning across the dark sky made her jump. She could make out the silhouette of a massive gothic structure with several towers on the top of a nearby hill. Her heart raced at the sight of it.

"*My word,*" the Fairy Godmother gasped. "It's Frankenstein's castle! The potion worked! I've traveled into the book!"

She left the world of *Frankenstein* and returned to her chambers through the beam. She closed the illuminating book on the floor with her foot and the light vanished, restoring the book to its normal state.

The Fairy Godmother could barely contain her excitement. She scooped up the potion bottle and ran down the hall to Lloyd's room, certain the news of her latest invention would excite him. She knocked a happy beat on his door.

"Lloyd, sweetheart?" she said, and stepped into her son's bedroom.

The room was darker than any other room in the Fairy Palace, especially at night. The palace was a very open place, but Lloyd had hung sheets and blankets around his room in lieu of walls for privacy, making it feel like an isolated tent.

The Fairy Godmother's son had a shelf of jars full of small rodents, reptiles, and insects. However, they seemed more like prisoners than pets by the way they desperately struggled to find a way out of their containers. His mother picked up a jar and was sad to see a moth had died—the same moth her son had promised to free just a few days before.

Lloyd was sitting in his bed reading *The Man in the Iron Mask* by candlelight. He was a small and thin child, with a plump face and dark hair.

He never looked up from reading, even as his mother had a seat at the foot of his bed.

“I’ve made you something very special, darling,” the Fairy Godmother said. “I’ve worked really hard on it, and I think it’s going to make you quite happy.”

Lloyd continued reading and acted like his mother was invisible. She took the book out of his hands, forcing him to pay attention to her.

“What if I told you there was a way to travel into your favorite stories?” the Fairy Godmother teased, and showed him the potion bottle. “This is a very powerful potion I’ve just created. With a few drops, we can transform any of your books into a portal! Wouldn’t that be wonderful? Wouldn’t you love to see all your favorite places and characters in person?”

Lloyd was silent as he processed the information. For a brief moment, the Fairy Godmother could see the intrigue form in his eyes as he looked over the bottle. Her heart soared as she thought a smile would surface on his face at any second. To her dismay, Lloyd only sighed.

“Traveling can be so tiring, Mother,” Lloyd said, and took his book back. “I’d much rather stay here and read.”

His mother’s hopes had flown so high only to plummet back to earth. If *this* couldn’t get a reaction out of him, she feared nothing ever would.

“Never mind, then,” she said, and stood to leave his room. “But please let me know if you change your mind.”

Too heartbroken to sleep, the Fairy Godmother wandered the halls of the Fairy Palace until she came to the Hall of Dreams. She pushed open the double doors and stepped into the boundless space and watched the thousands of orbs floating around. Each orb represented someone’s dream, and she hoped she could make *someone’s* dream come true before going to bed.

An intriguing thought came to her as she looked around: She had spent too much time *guessing* how to make her son happy. What if her son’s biggest dream was floating around the Hall of Dreams? If she peered into it, maybe she would discover how to help him.

The Fairy Godmother raised her wand and waved it in a quick circle. All the orbs in the Hall of Dreams instantly froze. Only one large orb in the distance kept moving. It floated toward her and landed in her hands. She peered inside it, anxious to know what her son’s dream looked like.

Everything was hazy inside, like it was full of steam or smoke. As the haze cleared, the Fairy Godmother let out a small scream from what she saw. There was destruction everywhere she looked. Castles and palaces were crumbling to the ground and villages were on fire. The ground was covered in carcasses of every creature imaginable. It was as if she were looking at the end of the world.

In the center of all the chaos, on top of a pile of debris, Lloyd was perched on a throne. He wore a large golden crown on his head. A chilling smile grew across his face as he observed the obliteration around him. In the distance, the Fairy Godmother saw something that made her skin crawl, and shivers went up and down her spine. It was a freshly dug grave, and her name was engraved on the tombstone.

The Fairy Godmother was sick to her stomach. Now it was clear why she could never make her son happy; his biggest dream was her greatest nightmare. Frankenstein wasn’t the only one responsible for creating a monster.…

Chapter One

THE WITCHES' BREW

The creatures of the Dwarf Forests knew to avoid Dead Man's Creek tonight if they valued their lives. At midnight of every full moon, witches from the forests and neighboring kingdoms gathered at the creek. The meetings were strictly for witches only, and they enjoyed making gruesome examples out of those who disturbed them.

Dead Man's Creek was shrouded in mystery, making it an ideal place for the witches to assemble. Every so often, without any warning or explanation, the creek redirected itself to flow *uphill* into the forest. And every time the rerouting occurred, coffins floated in from an unknown location.

The dead bodies in the coffins were never identified, nor was who or what had sent them—not that any time was given for an investigation. When corpses were found, the witches picked them apart like vultures, taking home what they needed in jars to stock their potion supplies.

The midnight gatherings were held at the Witches' Brew, an old tavern made entirely of twigs and mulch that sat in the middle of the creek like a giant beaver dam. Smoke rose from the tavern's single chimney, filling the air with a foul odor and signaling to the witches traveling to the creek that the meeting was about to begin.

The gatherings were usually uneventful and low in attendance. However, due to a recent crisis that had taken the kingdoms by storm, tonight's attendance was expected to be much higher than usual.

Some witches traveled to the creek on foot or by mule. Flocks of witches flew toward the tavern's smoky signal on broomsticks. A few sailed down the creek by boat or on makeshift rafts. Some even slithered through the water like serpents.

At half past midnight, the tavern was fuller than it had ever been. A

hundred or so witches were seated around an enormous cauldron in the center of the tavern, while the latecomers stood in the back.

Dark magic was known for leaving a mark on those who partook of it, and each woman's appearance had been affected differently. Some witches had warts, enlarged noses, decaying flesh, or eyeballs that hung out of their sockets. Others had been transformed past the point of appearing human and resembled other species. They had hooves and horns, tails and feathers; some even had snouts and beaks.

A short and stout witch with skin made of stone approached the cauldron. She threw a handful of rocks inside and the liquid glowed, illuminating the room in a menacing green light: The meeting had begun.

"Welcome, sisters," the stone witch said in a gruff voice. "I am Gargoylia, the Stone Mistress of the Dwarf Forests. I assume we've all come tonight to discuss the same matter, so let's not waste any time."

The witches looked around the tavern and nodded to one another. They may have been a diverse group, but they were united in paranoia.

Serpentina, a witch with scaly green skin and a long forked tongue, took the floor.

"We're here to *dissscusss* the *missssing* children," she hissed. "*Ssso* let me be the *firssst* to *sssay*, whichever witch *isss* taking them *needsss* to *ssstop* at once before *ssshe getsss usss* all killed!"

Most of the tavern was outraged by her remarks. Charcoaline, a witch made of ash and soot, hit the side of her seat so hard that part of her fist crumbled off.

"How dare you blame us!" she hollered at Serpentina. Embers flew out of her mouth as she spoke. As her temper rose, a lava-like glow filled the cracks of her skin. "We're always the first ones accused whenever there's a crisis! I expect better from someone of our own kind!"

Arboris, a witch whose hair was made of sticks and whose body was covered in tree bark, stood by Serpentina's side.

"Twelve children from the Corner Kingdom and twelve children from the Charming Kingdom have disappeared without a trace," Arboris said. "Only a witch would be stealthy and brave enough to commit such a crime, and she's probably among us in this tavern!"

Tarantulene, a large witch with fangs, four hairy arms, and four hairy legs, descended from the ceiling on a web produced from her abdomen. "If

you two are so certain a witch kidnapped the children, perhaps it was one of you!" she growled, pointing with all four of her hands.

The tavern grew increasingly loud as each witch voiced her opinions on the matter. Gargoylia threw another handful of rocks into the cauldron, and a blinding flash of green light hushed them.

"*Silence!*" Gargoylia yelled. "It doesn't matter which witch is responsible—the kingdoms will hold *all of us* responsible when they're caught! I've heard rumors that a witch hunt is being organized throughout the villages. We must prepare ourselves!"

A witch wearing scarlet robes stepped forward. "May I offer a suggestion?" she asked calmly. She lowered her hood and a few witches gasped. She was a completely normal-looking middle-aged woman—and a pretty one at that.

"*Hagetta!*" Gargoylia said with a dirty gaze. "After all this time, you've finally graced us with your presence."

"*Ssshe* doesn't belong here!" Serpentina hissed.

"She's an embarrassment to all *real* witches," Charcoaline said.

Chastising Hagetta was the only thing all the witches could agree on, but Hagetta had come to the tavern expecting to cause a fuss.

"Practicing white magic doesn't make me any less of a witch than you," Hagetta said. "And I guarantee you, no one outside this tavern will care what kind of witchcraft I practice if more children disappear. Angry mobs will sweep through the woods until every last witch is found. We'll *all* be rounded up and burned at the stake. So, unlike the rest of you, I've come to present a *solution* that will hopefully prevent a witch hunt from happening."

The witches mumbled and grunted insults at her. Gargoylia tossed another handful of rocks into the cauldron to quiet them.

"None of us want a witch hunt, so if Hagetta thinks she can save us from one, let her speak," she said. "But make it quick—I'm out of rocks."

Hagetta looked around the tavern, making eye contact with as many witches as possible. She knew it would be a challenging audience, but she wasn't going to leave until she convinced them.

"I say we stop assigning blame and put our efforts into finding the perpetrator," she said. "The world has always blamed all of us for individual witches' mistakes. None of you would have come tonight if you were responsible, so let's work together and turn over the one who *is*

responsible. We'll prove our innocence if we decide to *help* the kingdoms solve the mystery of the missing children."

"We can't turn in one of our own! This is a sisterhood!" Charcoaline yelled.

"It won't be much of a *sssisssterhood* if we're all dead," Serpentina said.

"The last thing the humans want is help from witches!" Arboris argued.

A witch standing in the back with a large stomach and a carrot-like nose burst into tears, and the entire tavern turned to her.

"I'm sorry," the emotional witch said. "I just relate to what Hagetta is saying. I'm not a saint, but I've been blamed my entire life for things that I'm innocent of."

She blew her nose into the cloak of the witch standing next to her.

"THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS AN INNOCENT WITCH!" shouted a deep voice no one was expecting to hear.

Suddenly, the front doors of the tavern burst open, causing all the witches to jolt. A man wearing a sack over his head strolled into the tavern as if he owned it. A dozen soldiers in red and white uniforms followed behind him. All the witches jumped to their feet, outraged by the intrusion.

"Forgive us for interrupting, *ladies*—and I use that term loosely," the Masked Man said with a cocky laugh. "I've been listening to your discussion all night, and I'm afraid I can't keep quiet any longer."

"How dare you disturb us!" Gargoylia shouted. "No one disrupts us and lives to tell—"

He raised a hand to silence her.

"Before you turn us into mice for your familiars to feast on, please allow me to introduce myself," he said. "They call me the Masked Man—for obvious reasons. The men behind me are what's left of the Grande Armée that nearly conquered the world five months ago. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

Although none of them had been directly involved with the recent war, the witches knew very well about the pandemonium the Grande Armée had caused.

"This man is a joke," Hagetta said, knowing she had to intervene somehow before the witches' curiosities grew any more. "He'll fill your head with tales of grandeur about how he led an army and raised a dragon, but in the end, a dying old fairy made him run for his life."

The Masked Man scowled at her. “So *you’ve* heard of me, at least,” he said. He looked Hagetta up and down—there was something very familiar about the witch. He was certain their paths had crossed a long time ago, but he didn’t want to waste any time recalling it. He had come to the tavern with a purpose, and the witches weren’t going to give him much time.

“I haven’t come here to impress you; I’ve come here to establish a *partnership* by offering you a warning,” he said.

“We don’t need partnerships with the likes of you,” Gargoylia said.

The Masked Man continued his pitch despite her unwillingness. “You have the right to be worried,” he said. “It’s widely believed that a witch is responsible for the missing children, and the villages that lost their young are not taking it lightly. I’ve lived in hiding for months and even I’ve heard about their upcoming retaliation. They aren’t planning a witch hunt—they’re planning an *extermination*!”

The news was heavy for the witches. Was the Masked Man trying to rile them up, or was the situation even worse than what they feared?

“Which is why we need to find the witch responsible while we still can,” Hagetta said.

The Masked Man shook his head. “I’m afraid there’s nothing you can do to prevent this,” he said. “Even if you proved every witch was innocent, this massacre will happen. They don’t want justice for the missing children; they want justice for every crime your kind has ever committed against theirs. They’re using the missing children as an excuse to seek centuries’ worth of revenge!”

The witches went quiet. Relations between witches and mankind had never been easy, and the missing children may have angered the kingdoms of man past the point of no return.

“You try to start wars wherever you go,” Hagetta said, desperately trying to belittle the information he was presenting. “We cannot listen to this man! He won’t be satisfied until the whole world burns!”

The Masked Man smiled. “There will be battles and fights, but you’re giving yourself too much credit if you think there’ll be a war,” he teased. “Witches won’t stand a chance once they’re targeted—you’re too outnumbered! Soon, your kind will be as extinct as the dragons.”

The emotional witch in the back burst into tears again. She hunched over and vomited on the floor. “Sorry,” she peeped. “I overwhelm easily.”

Colonel Rembert, who stood among the soldiers of the Grand Armée, raised an eyebrow at her. Something about this witch didn't sit well with him.

"I think the Happily Forever After Assembly is behind the kidnappings!" the Masked Man said. "The fairies have always wanted to get rid of the witches, and inspiring a massive witch extermination would do the trick! I wouldn't be surprised if the new Fairy Godmother kidnapped the children herself!"

"The Fairy Godmother would never kidnap two dozen children," said one of the heads of a two-headed witch in the back.

Rat Mary, a mousy witch with thick bushy hair and enormous buckteeth, stood on her seat to get the tavern's attention. "Even if the fairies aren't behind it, I'm sure they'll encourage it!" she said.

"They want to live in a world without witchcraft!" Arboris said.

"They want magic *sssolely* for *themssselvesss*!" Serpentina hissed.

The witches were easily convinced that the missing children had been a scheme concocted against them, and soon the entire tavern roared with hatred for the fairies. The Masked Man had the witches exactly where he wanted them.

"It's time the witches fought back!" the Masked Man said.

The witches cheered, but Gargoylia shook her head, acting as the voice of reason.

"That would be suicide," she said. "You just said we're outnumbered, especially if the fairies are involved."

The Masked Man rubbed his hands together. "Not if you make the right friends," he said snidely. "With my help, we can raise *another* army!"

The witches cackled at him. The idea seemed ridiculous.

Hagetta quickly reclaimed the floor. "An *army*? An army of *what*?" She laughed. "Besides, you already had an army, and it failed miserably. Who would trust you to handle another?"

The Masked Man jerked his head toward her. Clearly she had touched on a sore subject.

"I'VE NEVER FAILED!" he yelled. "I have spent my entire life planning a way to abolish the fairies! So far I have succeeded in every step of my plan! The Grande Armée, the dragon, and the attack on the Fairy Palace were never meant to defeat them—just weaken them! Once they

thought the fight was over, I snuck into the palace and retrieved a potion I've been after from the very beginning! Now that the potion is in my possession, the real war can begin!"

Beads of sweat soaked through the sack over the Masked Man's head. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself down.

"But before I can begin the next phase of my plan, I need your assistance," he continued. "There was something else in the Fairy Palace I meant to steal along with the potion—a collection of sorts, but the late Fairy Godmother must have gotten rid of it. I need your help finding where she put it. Once we find it and combine it with the potion, I'll be able to recruit the new army."

Gargoylia crossed her arms. "But what *kind* of army?" she asked. "If the Grande Armée and a dragon weren't enough to obliterate the fairies, what is?"

"An army beyond your wildest imaginations!" the Masked Man said with theatrical gestures. "An army that will make the Grande Armée look like a gang of children! I've been dreaming and scheming about it since I was a boy, and with your help we can bring it here. We can lead this army together and this world will be *ours*!"

The witches couldn't tell if the Masked Man was insane or if there was merit to what he was saying.

The emotional witch couldn't contain herself after hearing his speech. "I'm sorry. It's just so nice to see a man so passionate about something," she cried, and tears spilled down her face.

Colonel Rembert eyed the witch suspiciously. As the witch cried, her carrot-like nose was washed away by her tears—*it was a disguise!*

"Sir, I believe we are in the company of more than just witches!" Rembert shouted to the Masked Man. He quickly retrieved his pistol from inside his vest and aimed it at the witch.

Suddenly, the emotional witch leaped into the air and somersaulted toward Rembert, drawing a long sword from inside her cloak. She sliced off the tip of the pistol as she landed at Rembert's feet.

The witch moaned and held her stomach. "Somersaulting is more difficult when you're pregnant," she said.

The Masked Man stared down at the impostor—she wasn't a witch at all.

“GOLDILOCKS!” he screamed.

“Goldilocks, what are you doing in the tavern?” Hagetta said.

“Hello, Hagetta,” Goldilocks said. “We followed you here. We knew the Masked Man couldn’t resist an audience with the witches.”

“We?” Hagetta asked.

The Masked Man backhanded Rembert across his face. “You idiot! You’ve led us right into a trap!” he shouted. *“Seize her!”*

The soldiers of the Grand Armée rushed toward Goldilocks with their weapons raised.

“NOW!” she yelled.

Four figures in the back threw off their disguises. Jack, Red Riding Hood, Froggy, and the third Little Pig had been among the witches the entire time.

The two-headed witch charged toward the Masked Man, separating into two different people as she closed in—*Alex and Conner Bailey*. The two circled the Masked Man. Alex pointed her crystal wand at him and Conner raised his sword.

“You aren’t the only one with masks, dude,” Conner said.

Alex didn’t say anything. She was clutching her wand so hard, she was afraid it might break in her hand. After months and months of agonized searching, they had finally found him. She would unmask the Masked Man and expose his true identity to the world.

“It’s over,” Alex told him. “And no one is going anywhere this time!”

Alex flicked her wand at every window and door, and metal bars appeared over them. The twins, their friends, the witches, the soldiers, and the Masked Man were all trapped inside the tavern.

“It’s the Fairy Godmother!” Rat Mary screamed, and the tavern erupted in chaos. The witches ran around as if the place were on fire. With no exit, the disorder only grew. It was hard for the twins to keep track of the soldiers and Masked Man with all the panicking women running around them.

It was incredibly overwhelming, and Alex felt her heart beat faster and faster. She couldn’t lose the Masked Man again—not after coming so close.

“ENOUGH!” Alex yelled. Her eyes began to glow and her hair floated above her head. Without Alex raising her wand, vines shot out of the ground, wrapped around each witch and Grande Armée soldier, and pulled

them to the floor.

Conner looked around nervously. *"Alex, snap out of it!"* he whispered. *"Remember to stay focused so you can control your powers!"*

Alex shook her head and snapped out of the daze her emotions had put her in. Her hair fell and her eyes stopped glowing. She had been having difficulty controlling her powers in recent months, but she didn't care if the vines were summoned consciously or subconsciously—capturing the Masked Man was the only thing that mattered to her.

"You're a powerful girl, but you're going to make the witches angry if you treat them like this," the Masked Man said, looking around the tavern for any possible escape.

"I'll take my chances," Alex said.

"Very well—*so will I!*"

The Masked Man leaped toward the cauldron and pushed it over. The liquid spilled all over the floor and went dim, causing the tavern to go pitch-black. Alex waved her wand and torches appeared on the walls, restoring the light—but the Masked Man was gone.

"Alex! Look!" Conner yelled, and pointed to the fireplace. "He's going up the chimney! He's headed for the roof!"

She looked just in time to see the Masked Man's feet disappear up the fireplace. Alex dashed toward it and climbed up after him.

The witches fought against the vines restraining them. Serpentina, Tarantulene, Rat Mary, and Charcoaline broke free and zeroed in on Conner and the others.

"We will not be disrespected in our own tavern!" Rat Mary yelled. She stretched out her hand and a broomstick flew into it. She hopped aboard and flew in circles around Conner, scratching and smacking him as she went.

"OUCH!" Conner yelled. "Knock it off, rat lady!"

He grabbed her broom handle and the two of them zoomed around the tavern, bouncing off the walls and ceiling like a Ping-Pong ball.

Serpentina crawled across the walls like a lizard and lunged for Goldilocks. The expectant mother swung her sword and sliced off the witch's left arm. Goldilocks looked at the severed arm on the floor and burst into tears.

"I'm so sorry!" she sobbed, but her tears quickly disappeared. "Wait a second, no I'm not! *Damn these hormones!*"

It was a good thing she came to her senses, because Serpentina's arm grew back almost instantaneously. Her tongue rolled out of her mouth and whirled around Goldilocks like a slimy red whip. It wrapped around Goldilocks's foot and jerked her to the ground.

Jack ran across the tavern to help his wife, but Arboris stood in his way. Hundreds of insects crawled out of the witch's tree-bark skin and attacked him, biting and stinging him all over his body. He dropped to the floor and rolled around, frantically brushing them off.

Tarantulene had her sights set on Froggy. She chased him around the tavern, firing blasts of web at him as they ran.

"I hate spiders! I hate spiders!" Froggy shouted as he leaped away from her. "I can't believe I agreed to do this tonight! I have a kingdom to run!"

Instead of running to her friends' aid, Red had a seat with the third Little Pig and placed a thick binder between them.

"Since everyone is busy, I think we should take this moment to plan the final details of the wedding," she said cheerfully, and flipped through the binder.

"Of course, Your Former and Future Majesty," the third Little Pig said.

"Darling! I don't think this is a good time to plan our wedding!" Froggy said, barely dodging the web being shot at him.

"The wedding is *days* away, Charlie!" Red said. "We've spent so much time helping the twins track down the Masked Man, I've barely had time to plan anything! Now let's see, oh yes, I have to pick out the right fabric for the tablecloths.…"

She pulled out three samples of red fabric that were tucked neatly in the binder.

"What do you think, sweetheart? Should we go with the rubyrock, the blushington, or the blood-blossom?" she asked, and held up the samples to show him.

A rogue string of web shot toward Red, knocking a fabric sample out of her hand and sticking it to the wall.

"Oh, nice suggestion!" she said. "Rubyrock it is!"

"Yes, ma'am," the third Little Pig said, and took note of the decision in a small pad.

Conner couldn't hold on to the broomstick any longer. He let go and he and Rat Mary spun in opposite directions. Rat Mary crashed into Serpentina

just as she was about to pounce on Goldilocks, and they both hit the floor.

Conner landed on top of Charcoaline. The witch roared at him and her entire body glowed from the lava building up inside her. She opened her mouth and a fiery jet erupted from it like a dragon. Conner dove behind the sideways cauldron, barely missing the inferno.

“I could use a little help over here! Things are getting heated!” Conner yelled to his friends.

Hagetta kneeled down and placed an open palm on the floor. She closed her eyes and concentrated. A rumbling traveled from directly beneath Hagetta to under Charcoaline. A geyser of water shot out of the ground under her, blasting her to the other side of the tavern. Hagetta redirected the rumbling and another geyser erupted under Arboris, sending her across the tavern, too.

Goldilocks ran to Jack’s side and helped him brush the insects off of his body. She suddenly hunched over in pain.

“Goldie, are you all right?” Jack asked.

“The baby is kicking,” she said. “I think it wants to join the fight. Boy or girl, it sure has a strong kick.”

“Just like its mother,” Jack said with a smile.

At the other side of the tavern, Red was losing patience with Froggy.

“What should we use as the centerpiece for the tables?” Red asked. “Candles or flowers?”

There was no response. Froggy was still frantically jumping away from Tarantulene. He was panting and slowing down. Each shot of web the witch aimed at him was a closer call than the one before.

“Charlie, why do I feel like I’m the only one who cares about this wedding?” she asked. “The least you can do is give me an answer.”

She looked over her shoulder and saw that Froggy was stuck to a wall, twisted in Tarantulene’s sticky web. The spider witch walked toward him with her fangs exposed. Froggy turned a shade of pale green.

“I won’t taste good!” Froggy yelled.

“Nice try, but frog is my favorite!” Tarantulene growled.

Just as she was about to sink her fangs into him, Red hit her over the head with a chair. The witch fell to the floor and didn’t move.

“Well done, darling!” Froggy cheered.

Red dragged the chair close to him and had a seat. “Charlie, since I

finally have you pinned down for a moment, I think now is a good time to talk about the guest list."

Froggy sighed. There was no avoiding the wedding plans now.

Meanwhile, the Masked Man crawled through the opening of the chimney and stepped onto the roof. He ran along the edge, looking for a way down. Alex was right behind him, but as she squeezed through the top of the chimney, her arms became trapped at her sides and she couldn't reach her wand.

The Masked Man got to his hands and knees and carefully started climbing down to the ground.

"YOU'RE NOT ESCAPING THIS TIME!" Alex yelled. Just as they had before, her eyes glowed and her hair floated above her. Suddenly, the entire tavern began to sway. It rocked back and forth, then departed from the creek entirely and rose into the air like a giant balloon.

"Alex! I hope you're doing this on purpose!" Conner said. When there was no response, he crawled up the chimney after her.

The tavern floated higher and higher into the air, flying above the trees of the Dwarf Forests and into the clouds. The chimney around Alex broke away brick by brick and she was freed. There was no way the Masked Man could escape. This was finally Alex's chance to ask him about what she had been obsessing over for months.

"Just tell me *why*!" she said. "Why did you lie to us? Why did you pretend to be dead?"

"Life would be so dull if we knew all the answers," the Masked Man said, eyeing the ground below as it disappeared from view.

"How could you do this to your own family?" she asked desperately. "We loved you!"

The Masked Man laughed. "You're learning it the hard way, just like I had to," he said. "There is no such thing as *love*. Families are just strangers who share blood. They claim to love you unconditionally, but in the end, they always betray you the most. My mother taught me that lesson, and now you're learning it from me."

Alex shook her head. "You're sick," she said. "I don't know how you ended up like this, but Conner and I can help you!" She extended an open hand, but the Masked Man just glared at it.

Conner crawled through the broken chimney and cautiously joined his

sister’s side.

“Alex, are you taking us to the moon?” he said.

They were thousands of feet in the air now, well above the clouds. Alex hadn’t noticed how high the tavern had floated, and she didn’t care.

“Face it, you don’t have a choice,” Alex told the Masked Man. “There’s only one way down and you’re coming with us!”

The Masked Man reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small book with a gold cover and a blue potion bottle. Alex immediately recognized the small vial as the bottle he stole from the Fairy Palace.

“You’re wrong,” he said softly. “There’s always a choice.”

The Masked Man rolled off the roof and plummeted back to the earth. The twins screamed and ran to the edge of the roof to look over it. The Masked Man fell through the clouds below and disappeared from sight.

“I can’t believe it!” Conner said. *“He killed himself!”*

Alex shook her head in disbelief. *“No!”* she said. “It wasn’t supposed to end this way! We were supposed to help him!”

A thousand feelings spiraled through her like an emotional tornado. She was so overwhelmed that she could barely focus on anything. Her hair fell back into place and her eyes returned to normal.

The tavern suddenly dropped through the sky. The twins and everyone inside the tavern began to scream. Conner held on to the broken chimney with one hand and his sister with the other so they wouldn’t fly off it.

Pieces of the tavern broke off as it fell. A large chunk of the roof flew off and the twins could see their friends inside, holding on to anything they could.

“I’d like to get married in one piece, please!” Red screamed.

“Alex! Do something!” Conner yelled at her.

It was hard for Alex to get a grip on her wand as they fell. When she did, she raised it above her head and cracked it like a whip just before they reached the ground. As if the tavern were connected to an invisible bungee cord, it jerked back upward and then crashed on top of Dead Man’s Creek —imploding into a large pile of sticks.

“Is everyone alive?” Conner asked as he and Alex brushed the debris off themselves.

Their friends, the soldiers, and all the witches moaned—everyone was covered in bits of the former tavern. Goldilocks sat up and vomited again.

“Is that from the baby or the drop?” Jack asked.

“I’m not sure,” Goldilocks said.

Gargoylia roared, still fighting the vines wrapped around her. “You’ve destroyed our tavern!” she yelled. “You’ll pay for this!”

“Bill us,” Conner said, and helped his sister and friends to their feet.

“What happened to the Masked Man?” Froggy asked.

Conner looked at Alex, but she couldn’t bring herself to say it. Her friends had given up months of their lives to help her search for the Masked Man, only to go home with nothing. The guilt was unbearable, and Alex felt like her life was just as wrecked as the tavern.

“He’s gone,” Conner told the others. “Like, *really gone*.”

Within the hour, Sir Lampton and a small fleet of Charming Kingdom soldiers joined them at the wrecked tavern. They had been stationed in the woods nearby in case the twins needed them. They rounded up the remaining Grande Armée soldiers and the witches and put all of them in restraints.

Alex sat on a boulder by the creek decompressing from the night’s events. Conner walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder.

“If anything good comes from tonight, at least we know none of these witches are behind the missing children,” he said.

Although she would never admit it, the missing children couldn’t be further from her mind.

“I never expected he would rather take his own life than face us,” she said. “I never would have made the tavern float if I thought he’d jump.”

“But did *you* actually make the tavern float, or did it just *happen*?” Conner asked. “A lot of things have just been *happening* lately.”

Alex rolled her eyes and walked away from him, but he followed her.

“Ever since you saw the Masked Man’s face, you’ve been having a difficult time controlling your powers,” he said. “It’s just something you should be careful of—”

“Why are you still calling him the Masked Man?” Alex yelled. “He’s our *father*, Conner! I know what I saw! Why don’t you believe me?”

“I wouldn’t have spent the last five months helping you search for him if I didn’t believe you saw *something*,” he said. “I just can’t fully accept that he’s our father until I see his face for myself.”

Alex sighed. “Well, he’s dead, so neither of us has to worry about him

ever again," she said. "I just wish I could have gotten to him in time to help him—to change him back to the man we knew."

Conner nodded. "Now you can just focus on fixing yourself."

He wasn't nearly as upset as his sister, because in truth, he had never believed that the Masked Man was their father. No matter how many times she reenacted the story, he knew their dad could never do what the Masked Man had done to the fairy-tale world. Although, Conner could never bring himself to tell his sister how he really felt.

"What should we do about the Grande Armée and the witches?" Sir Lampton called out to the twins.

"Take the Grande Armée soldiers to Pinocchio Prison," Alex instructed. "But let the witches go—I want to set the record straight that I have nothing against them."

"Yes, Fairy Godmother," Sir Lampton said.

A Charming Kingdom soldier emerged from the woods and ran to Sir Lampton's side.

"Sir, we searched the forest, but there is no sign of the Masked Man," he said. "We searched the area we were certain he had fallen to, but we didn't find his body or any trace of him."

Alex and Conner looked at each other in shock.

"What?" Alex said. "Could he be alive?"

"How could he have survived the fall?" Conner asked.

Alex's eyes darted around the creek and landed on Colonel Rembert. She charged toward him. Her eyes began to glow and her hair floated above her head. Once again, her anger had taken control.

"Alex? What are you doing?" Conner asked, and ran after her.

Before he could stop her, the trees around the creek suddenly came to life. They grabbed every person at the creek except for Alex with their branches and held them tightly to their trunks. Conner, his friends, the witches, and the soldiers of the Grande Armée and Charming Kingdom were all prisoners of Alex's subconscious.

The tree holding Colonel Rembert detached itself from the ground and held him in the air in front of Alex.

"How did he survive the fall? You must know!" she yelled.

"I assure you, mademoiselle, I do not," he said.

The tree tightened its grip around his body—but it wasn't the only one.

All the trees at the creek squeezed their captives tighter.

“Alex! Calm down! You’re hurting us!” Conner pleaded.

His sister was practically in a trance—he had never seen her so angry. Nothing existed around her but Colonel Rembert and the answers she needed from him.

“What does the potion he stole from the Fairy Palace do?” Alex asked. “And what else does he need to recruit the army he spoke of?”

“He never told us!” Rembert said. “He was very secretive!”

The branches wrapped around Rembert’s throat and choked him.

“Then you must know where he’s headed!” Alex exclaimed. “*Tell me!*”

Rembert was gagging and could barely speak. “I… don’t… know…” He coughed. “I swear!”

“ALEX, KNOCK IT OFF!” Conner screamed.

Alex came to her senses and the trees returned to normal, dropping their captives to the ground. She looked around the creek in bewilderment at what she had just caused—it was like she had become another person entirely.

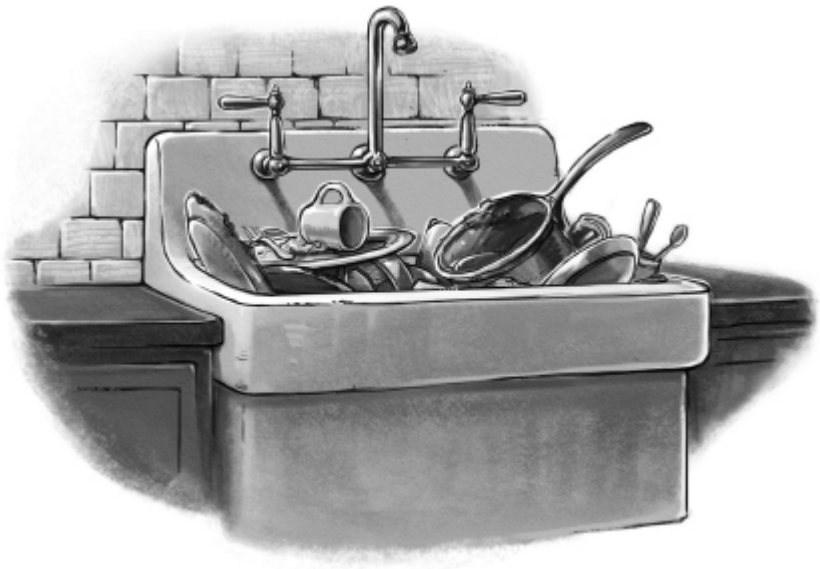
Her brother and her friends all stared at her in shock. None of them, including Alex, knew she was capable of such a thing.

“I’m so sorry!” Alex said, and tears came to her eyes. “I don’t know what came over me!”

She covered her face and ran into the forest. Her brother didn’t even try following her; it was obvious she wanted to be alone.

“I’m afraid our search for the Masked Man is far from over,” Froggy said, breaking the tension.

Conner nodded, but continuing their search for the Masked Man wasn’t what any of them were afraid of—*they were afraid of his sister*.



Chapter Two

“DO YOU ACCEPT THE CHARGES?”

Emmerich Himmelsbach stood at the kitchen sink washing stroganoff stains off a stack of plates. It was the hundred and forty-sixth night in a row he had washed dishes (not that he was counting), and if his mother was serious when she punished him, Emmerich had about two thousand more nights to go.

As far as Fraulein Himmelsbach knew, five months ago Emmerich ran off with an American delinquent for a few days of childish fun. When he returned, he was scolded, lectured, stripped of all privileges, and given dish duty until he was old enough to leave home. But Emmerich thought it was a small price to pay for embarking on what he considered *the adventure of a lifetime*. And having to keep the truth of his excursion a total secret proved to be the real punishment.

Emmerich spent every moment of every day thinking about the amazing people he met and all the incredible places he saw in the fairy-tale world. He desperately wished he could talk about his adventures with someone, but the only person he could safely reminisce with lived on the other side of the globe.

He was halfway through the dishes when the kitchen phone started ringing. Emmerich didn’t answer it at first, expecting his mother to pick up in the next room. After the seventh ring he dried his hands and picked up the receiver.

“Hallo?” he said.

“Emmerich Himmelsbach?” an American woman asked.

“Yah?” the young German boy replied, curious as to how this stranger knew his name.

“You have a collect call from Miss Bree Campbell in the United States,” the operator said. “Do you accept the charges?”

Emmerich didn’t completely understand what she meant, but if Bree was trying to contact him, he figured it was best to accept. “I guess so,” he said.

He heard a click, and then a frenzied, stressed, but familiar voice came on the phone.

“Emmerich? Is that you?” Bree whispered.

“Bree! I… I… I was just thinking about you!” Emmerich said. He was so excited to speak with her that he could barely remember English.

“I’ve been thinking about you, too,” she whispered.

“Why are you whispering? Are you all right?” Emmerich asked.

“I’m fine, but I don’t have long to talk,” Bree said. “It’s still morning over here. I’m hiding in the janitor’s closet at school. This was the only place I could find any privacy. Where are you? Are you someplace safe?”

Emmerich looked around the kitchen and shrugged. “Yes, I’m safe.”

“Good,” Bree said. “I’ve been dying to talk to you! My parents grounded me until college for sneaking away from the school trip. I just convinced them to give me back my cell phone. By the way, thanks for accepting the charges of this call—my parents would have seen it on our phone bill if you hadn’t.”

“I’ve been in trouble since we got back, too,” Emmerich said. “My mother’s made me do dishes every night since we got back! How bad did you get it?”

Bree sighed. “I got dishes, vacuuming, yard work, and any other agonizing task they can think of,” she said. “But listen, I’ve really got to talk to you about something! I’ve been thinking a lot about our trip to the fairy-tale world—”

“It’s all I ever think about!” Emmerich said. “Not a day goes by that I don’t wish we could go back somehow.”

“I feel the same way!” Bree said. “I’ve been missing the fairy-tale world so much, I started plotting a way back to Neuschwanstein to travel through the portal again.”

“I wish we could,” Emmerich said. “But to activate it we would need someone of magic blood to play the panpipe—and we don’t have either of those.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Bree said. “So I started thinking of other ways the portal might be activated—which made me think about the portal itself, how it worked, and everything we learned about it—and I know I read too

many mystery novels, *but I think I've discovered a major plot hole in what we were told!*"

Emmerich was confused. "You found a hole into the fairy-tale world?" he asked.

"Not an actual hole—a hole in the explanation we were given," she said. "I've been thinking a lot about the portal we traveled through to get into the fairy-tale world, and something doesn't add up."

"What is it?" Emmerich asked.

"The Grande Armée was trapped in the same portal for over two hundred years," Bree said. "So here's my question—if the Grande Armée was trapped for so long, how did *we* manage to cross through it so quickly? Shouldn't *we* have been trapped in the portal for just as long as General Marquis and his men?"

Emmerich closed one eye and scrunched his forehead as he thought about it. "But Conner and Mother Goose used the portal, too, and they never got stuck."

"Exactly!" she said, forgetting to whisper. "So what separates Mother Goose and Conner from the Grande Armée?"

Emmerich took a wild guess. "They aren't French?"

"No," Bree said. "They could cross through the portal without problems because they had magic in their blood! *Meaning you and I must have magic in our blood, too!* It's the only explanation!"

His mouth dropped open. He didn't understand how this could possibly be true, but he wanted to believe it with every fiber of his being.

"But how?" Emmerich said. "We aren't related to anyone from the fairy-tale world."

"That's where my theory gets a little tricky," Bree said. "If I'm remembering it correctly, Mother Goose transferred some of her blood into Wilhelm Grimm so he could play the panpipe and trap the Grande Armée into the portal—"

"Should I be writing this down?" Emmerich asked.

Bree continued while he looked for a pen and paper. "You and I are both from German heritages," she explained. "Meaning it's possible we may be *descendants of Wilhelm Grimm!*"

Emmerich gasped. "*Ach mein Gott,*" he said, and his rosy cheeks went pale. "That would mean you and I are distant family!"

Bree was grinning ear to ear—she had waited a long time to share this discovery with someone else. “And we may be capable of opening a portal to the fairy-tale world ourselves!”

Emmerich turned on the garbage disposal so he could squeal without his mother hearing. “But how can we prove it?”

“We’ll have to trace our family trees,” she said. “It’ll be difficult for me, since I’ve been grounded from pretty much everything under the sun, and I can’t exactly tell my parents why I’m suddenly so interested in our ancestry—but we’ve got to try!”

A bell rang on Bree’s side of the phone.

“I have to go,” she said. “I’m already late for my next class. I’ll call you back after I do a little research on my family. Try to find out what you can about yours, too.”

“I will! *Viel Glück!* That means *good luck* in German!”

“I know,” she said. “*Viel Glück* to you, too!”

Bree hung up her phone and sighed with relief. It felt like a ton of bricks had been lifted off her shoulders now that she had finally talked to Emmerich, but the weight was replaced with adrenaline. Bree and Emmerich were on the verge of the greatest discovery of their young lives.

She stood up from the bucket she had been sitting on and exited the tiny janitor’s closet. When she opened the door, Bree was accosted by four girls she had the misfortune of sharing a grade with.

“The closet is an odd place to make a phone call, don’t you think?” Mindy asked with a judgmental eyebrow.

Mindy, Cindy, Lindy, and Wendy—the four members of the reading club, aka the Book Huggers—were lined up in the hallway waiting for Bree to come out. She tried to push past them, but they blocked her from leaving the closet.

“You guys have been following me around for months,” Bree said with an agonized eye-roll. “You’ve got to stop this—you’re starting to creep me out!”

“Who were you talking to, Bree?” Cindy asked. Her voice always had a slight vibration due to a mouthful of metal braces.

“That’s none of your business,” Bree said, and tried pushing past them again.

“Actually, it is,” Lindy said, hovering over her like a streetlamp. “We’ve

been appointed *hall monitors* this semester by Principal Peters—everything that happens outside of class between school hours is our business."

Wendy, who had never been known to make a sound, crossed her arms and nodded along.

Bree closed her eyes tightly, trying not to roll them again. "I don't know how you'll find the time to monitor the hallways in between the reading club and *stalking me*," she said.

"We're not running the reading club anymore," Mindy said. She tossed each of her trademark pigtails as if they had been promoted to something much greater.

"We decided to take a break from books and focus our energy on another passion," Cindy said. "So we started a brand-new club."

"The Conspiracy Club!" Lindy was happy to share. "Now our little hobby of keeping an eye on suspicious events can be an extracurricular activity!"

Bree let out a long, anguished sigh. It didn't matter what they called themselves; they would always be the Book Huggers to her.

"For the thousandth time, Alex and Conner transferred to a school in Vermont," she said. "They weren't abducted by aliens, or kidnapped by Bigfoot, or swallowed by a man-eating plant, or whatever you obsess over."

Mindy glanced at the others. "A man-eating plant? Hmmm… we never thought of that.…"

"The point I'm trying to make is that they're completely fine! All four of you need to get a life!" Bree said.

"How come everyone we talk to says that?" Cindy asked. "Mrs. Peters, the district supervisor, the police, our parents… they all say we need to find something better to do with our time! How come we're the only ones who realize something fishy is going on?"

If they hadn't been driving her nuts for months, Bree would have felt bad for lying to them. They were so fixated on the Bailey twins; keeping information from them was like hiding chew toys from a bunch of teething puppies.

"Well, this has been fun, but I'm late for class," Bree said, and finally squeezed through them.

"You can't go to class without a pass," Lindy said, and all four of them shared a malicious grin.

“So write me a pass, then,” Bree said, but she could tell from their self-righteous faces that it wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Bree, Bree, Bree,” Mindy said as she shook her head. “We’ve known you since kindergarten. You’re like a sister to us.”

“I don’t want to be your sister.”

“So we’ll make you a deal,” Mindy continued. “We’ll do you a favor and not tell Mrs. Peters that we caught you talking on your phone in the closet if you just tell us where Alex and Conner are. Plain and simple.”

“But you can’t prove I was on my phone,” Bree said. “You have no evidence.”

Mindy jerked her head to the other three—none of them had thought of that.

“I’ve got a counteroffer for you,” she said. “Why don’t you write me a pass, excusing me for being late to class, and I’ll tell you where Alex and Conner really are.”

The Book Huggers were shocked by her willingness.

“Really?” Mindy asked.

“Totally!” Cindy said.

“Yeah, coming right up!” Lindy said.

Wendy nodded her head so fast, she almost pulled a muscle.

All four of them whipped out their pads and wrote her a pass. Mindy was the quickest and handed it over. Bree inspected the pass and then shrugged.

“Cool, thanks, guys,” she said, and turned to leave.

“Wait! You have to tell us where they are!” Mindy said.

The Book Huggers were bobbing with so much anxiety, they looked like they were about to wet their pants.

“Oh, I’m not telling you *today*,” Bree said. “That wasn’t part of our agreement—but I will *eventually*. If you’re going to be a conspiracy club, you’ve got to pay better attention to the details.”

Bree proceeded down the hall to class. The Book Huggers looked like a pack of wild hogs about to charge at her.

“Don’t worry, girls,” Mindy said to calm her friends. “This isn’t over—even if it’s the last thing we do, we *will* find out what really happened to the Bailey twins.”

Chapter Three

THE UNGODMOTHERING

"It has been two weeks since I last heard from you!" Charlotte yelled from the magic mirror. "Do you know what it's like to be a parent and not hear from your children? One day I hope you have kids who disappear for weeks and months at a time just so you know what you and your sister constantly put me through!"

Conner sat in his sister's chambers at the Fairy Palace, wishing he were anywhere else in the world. "No, Mom, I don't," he said. "I'm sorry we haven't been good about keeping you informed."

"I WILL NOT tolerate this anymore!" she said. "If I don't hear from you at least twice a week, I am coming into the fairy-tale world and bringing you both home!"

"Mom, you can't come into the fairy-tale world without magic—" Conner said, and quickly realized he shouldn't have.

Charlotte raised both eyebrows and gave her son the dirtiest look he had ever seen her make. "You don't think I can come into the fairy-tale world, Conner?" she asked, and swiveled her head. "I don't care how thick the border is between dimensions; nothing is going to keep me from my children. Magic or no magic, I will crawl right through this mirror and drag you both back home if I have to!"

It was obvious there was nothing he could say to make the situation any better. The twins were guilty of neglecting their mother, and now Conner was getting an earful about it.

"Mom, you have every right to be mad, but please chill out—"

"Conner Jonathan Bailey, don't tell me to chill out!" she said. He knew he was in serious trouble whenever she used his full name. "How am I supposed to chill out when my fourteen-year-old children are fighting armies and dragons in another world?"

“Actually, Grandma is the one who fought off the dragon,” he said.

“That dragon is going to look like a bunny compared to me if I have to come over there,” Charlotte warned. “And where is your sister? Why isn’t she talking to me?”

The twins had agreed it was best to keep the details of their latest escapades as basic as possible when they talked to their mother. If she was this mad at them for not contacting her regularly, Conner couldn’t imagine how she might react if she found out the man they were hunting down could potentially be her deceased husband.

“Alex is in a meeting with the Fairy Council,” Conner said. “She’s not trying to upset you. She’s just got a lot on her plate now that Grandma’s gone.”

It was difficult for Conner to keep the truth from his mother, especially as he watched how it had affected Alex. He half wished his mother *would* find a way into the fairy-tale world and somehow retune his sister.

“I don’t care how important or powerful you two become. I am your mother and I deserve some respect!” Charlotte said. *“If presidents and kings manage to call their mothers, my children can, too!”*

There was a knock on the door. Froggy and Jack poked their heads into the chambers. Conner figured they must have been eavesdropping, because they looked much more concerned than usual.

“It’s okay, guys, you can come in,” Conner said. “My mom is just chewing me out for not calling her more.” He tried to laugh it off, but their expressions didn’t change.

“You should come to the grand hall,” Froggy said.

“Things are pretty heated between your sister and the council,” Jack said.

Conner sighed—there never seemed to be a moment’s rest, especially around the palace. “Mom, I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go put out a fire,” he said. “I promise to talk to you at least twice a week. I’ll drag Alex in front of the mirror next time if I have to.”

Charlotte crossed her arms. “One last thing before you go!” Conner braced himself for her last remark—he was positive this one would really sting.

“I love you both so much. Please be safe,” Charlotte said softly.

It broke Conner’s heart. He wondered if she had planned to end their

conversation like this all along. His mother was a master at making him feel guilty.

“We love you, too, Mom,” Conner said. “And don’t worry; we’ve got a lot of people looking after us. Please tell Bob we said hello.”

Charlotte’s image disappeared from the mirror. Conner followed Froggy and Jack out of the chambers and down the stairs into the grand hall of the Fairy Palace. He thought things between him and his mother had been tense, but tension was so high in the hall, it was difficult to breathe.

The Fairy Council stood behind their respective podiums as Alex paced in front of them. The entire room was uncomfortable, and Conner could tell his sister was furious.

Alex had changed up her look in recent months, dropping everything that reminded her of their late grandmother. She replaced her blue gown that sparkled like a starry sky with a simpler green dress that grew wildflowers out of the seams. Her hair was longer than it had ever been, and a thin headband did a poor job at keeping it out of her face. She barely used her wand anymore—even that was too reminiscent of her grandmother.

Conner, Jack, and Froggy found Red and Goldilocks standing in the back. Both women were very quiet and stared at the floor.

“What’s going on?” Conner whispered to them.

“The council is asking Alex to call off her search for the Masked Man,” Goldilocks whispered back. “And she isn’t taking it well.”

That much was obvious. Alex could barely look any of the Fairy Council members in the eye.

“I don’t understand why none of you are listening to me,” Alex snapped.

“We *are* listening,” Emerelda said. “But we don’t agree with you.”

“What part don’t you agree with?” Alex raised her voice. “The Masked Man is still out there! He is dangerous and we need to find him—end of discussion!”

“The Masked Man is a criminal, but we don’t see him as a threat now that the rest of the Grande Armée has been captured,” Xanthous said. “We’ve supported your search for five months. It’s unfortunate that he hasn’t been captured yet, but it’s time to move our attention to more pressing matters.”

“There are still twelve children from the Charming Kingdom and twelve children from the Corner Kingdom missing,” Skylene reminded the room.

“And I bet the Masked Man is behind that,” Alex said. “He said himself he’s in the middle of a grand scheme that he spent more than a decade plotting. I wouldn’t be surprised if he kidnapped the children to get the witches’ attention. He needed their help to recruit another army, so he orchestrated the beginnings of a witch hunt to scare them and convince them they needed protection!”

No matter how logical it was to her, the Fairy Council refused to believe the two were connected. Alex did the best she could to keep her frustration in check, but she could feel it bubbling up inside her like a volcano.

“Yes, you told us,” Tangerina said. “The Masked Man plans on recruiting an army *‘beyond our wildest imaginations’* using the potion he stole from your grandmother’s chambers.”

“We understand why this would concern you,” Emerelda said. “However, it sounds like a delusional man’s fantasy more than a well-thought-out plan.”

Alex shook her head. She was more stubborn than all of them put together. “I’m the Fairy Godmother, and I became the Fairy Godmother by following my heart,” she said. “And my heart is telling me that the Masked Man is up to something. I’m not going to change my mind until he’s caught.”

The members of the Fairy Council eyed one another. This was what they were afraid of.

Emerelda closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “This is not a request, Alex,” the green fairy said. “Either you call off the search for the Masked Man or we’ll be forced to take action against you.”

The tension instantly doubled in the hall. Alex looked back at Conner and their friends, but they were just as stunned as she was.

“Excuse me?” Alex asked, and crossed her arms. “What do you mean, *take action against me*?”

“As members of the Happily Forever After Assembly, it is our job to protect it,” Xanthous said. “And if our leader is making decisions we all disagree with, that may be harmful to the kingdoms in any way, we can’t stand by and let it happen.”

Alex threw her arms into the air. “Let me remind you, if it hadn’t been for my brother and me, all of you would be dead! I’m not the enemy—the enemy is out there and you’re wasting time!”

“You asked Jack and Goldilocks to form a committee to track down the Masked Man and his men,” Rosette said. “Detach yourself from the task so this council can focus on something productive.”

“That was before I found out who the Masked Man really was!” Alex blurted out. She had hoped their disagreement wouldn’t lead to this.

“Alex, listen to yourself,” Skylene said. “Your judgment is clouded because you think this man is your father.”

“I *know* he’s my father! I saw his face with my own eyes!” she said. “After all the times my judgment and intuition has saved this world, why are you fighting me on this?”

“Your father died four years ago in the Otherworld,” Xanthous said. “The Masked Man was in Pinocchio Prison for over a decade. This couldn’t be the same man—it isn’t possible.”

“You said you saw your father just two days after your grandmother passed away,” Emerelda said. “Sometimes when we’re overwhelmed, we see what we *want* to, rather than what’s actually there.”

Alex was appalled that Emerelda would suggest such a thing. She could feel her blood boiling in her veins—she didn’t know how much longer she had until she lost control of her anger.

“You think I *wanted* to see my father under that mask?” she asked. “Do you think I’ve *wanted* to lie awake every night wondering how my father became a murdering thief? Or why he lied about his death to his children? I know the facts don’t add up, I know it doesn’t make sense, but four years ago, if you’d told me the fairy-tale world existed, I wouldn’t have believed that, either.”

The Fairy Council members either rolled their eyes or sighed in exasperation. Alex couldn’t believe how difficult they were making this.

“If you all think what I’m saying is impossible, then we could be dealing with some seriously dark magic—perhaps magic we’ve never dealt with before. I know with all my heart that if we ignore this, we’ll regret it,” she said.

Conner closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was hard watching his sister have to practically beg for respect. However, he wouldn’t believe her if he were in their shoes.

Emerelda must have sensed his uneasiness, because she suddenly redirected the room’s attention to him. “Conner, what do you think? Do you

think your sister saw what she thinks she saw?”

Conner’s insides tightened from being put on the spot. His sister looked back at him with big pleading eyes; if anyone could convince the council Alex wasn’t being irrational, it was him. He had been at her side since before they were born.

“I… I… I don’t know,” Conner mumbled. He stepped closer to her, trying to have a private word in a crowded room. “Alex, in just a few days you had your heart broken by that Rook guy, we fought an army, we lost Grandma, and you became the leader of the fairy-tale world. Maybe Emerelda is right? Maybe you didn’t actually see what you think you saw?”

Alex felt like she’d had the wind knocked out of her. She didn’t have a single ally among them, not even in her own brother. He had proven what the Masked Man said to her on the roof of the Witches’ Brew—it was family who betrayed her the most.

A few tears rolled down Alex’s face without her realizing. Still, she wasn’t ready to give up.

“I don’t care how delusional you all think I am,” she said. “I’m going to find the Masked Man and prove you wrong, with or without your help.”

Each of the council members nodded to Emerelda. The moment they were all dreading had finally come.

“Then I’m afraid we have no choice,” Emerelda said. “Alex, the council feels you are blinded by your emotions and not fit to lead the Happily Forever After Assembly. For the first time in history, we hereby *ungodmother* you.”

“WHAT?” Conner yelled. He couldn’t believe his ears. *“How is that allowed?”*

“As your new superiors, we order you to stop your search for the Masked Man at once,” Xanthous said. “We believe continuing your pursuit will do more harm than good, so anything you do from here on out against the council’s wishes will be considered a crime.”

“You can’t do this!” Jack shouted.

“She hasn’t done anything wrong!” Goldilocks said.

“We were hoping to avoid this, but you heard her yourselves,” Emerelda said.

Everyone turned to Alex. All the blood drained from her face and she was eerily quiet. It was like she was having a bad dream. The people she

once considered friends and colleagues were treating her like a criminal.

Alex couldn't suppress her feelings anymore. She felt her frustration, her anger, and her agitation begin to surface from deep within her. As emotion surged through her body, she went numb and completely lost herself to rage.

"Oh, no," Conner whispered to his friends. "This isn't going to be good."

Alex's eyes started to glow and her hair floated above her head. She howled with laughter and levitated in the air. The Fairy Council was terrified—they had never seen her like this before.

"What's happening?" Xanthous asked anxiously.

"She's just a little overwhelmed, that's all!" Conner said. He put himself between Alex and the council, desperately trying to defuse the situation. "Just give her a minute and everything will be fine—"

Alex jerked her head up and reached toward the sky. A series of lightning bolts rained down from the clouds and hit the council's podiums until each of them exploded. The members of the council dived to the floor for safety.

Everyone in the entire hall looked to one another in panic—none of them knew what to do.

"Seize her!" Emerelda shouted.

The Fairy Council flew into the air and surrounded Alex from all different angles. Alex waved her hands around her body and a tall wall of flames circled her, blocking their approach. The flames shot into the air with the power of a large rocket. The blast was so strong that Conner was knocked clear across the room. The flames disappeared and Alex vanished into thin air.

The grand hall became so quiet, you almost could hear everyone's hearts racing in unison. Emerelda sprinted toward Conner. He struggled to get to his feet, but she didn't offer him a hand.

"How long has this been going on?" she demanded. Her eyes were wide and her nostrils flared.

"On and off for a couple of months," he said. "But she's never done anything like *that* before!"

"Why didn't you bring this to our attention?" Emerelda said. She used the same tone his mother did in Alex's chambers.

“Oh, come on now,” Red said, trying to lighten the mood. “She’s just a teenage girl! I used to throw little tantrums like that all the time! Granted, I never disappeared into blazing infernos.”

“That was not a tantrum!” Emerelda said.

“Then what’s going on with her?” Conner asked.

“My guess is your sister is so drained from chasing the Masked Man that she has lost touch with herself,” Emerelda said. “She has no control of her powers!”

“Tell me something I don’t know!” Conner said. “So how do we help her?”

Emerelda ignored him and turned to the other members of the Fairy Council. “I want all of you to contact the kings and queens of the Happily Forever After Assembly at once,” she instructed. “Tell them all to cease contact with Alex immediately. We must put all of our efforts into finding and capturing her, by any means necessary.”

Conner felt like he had whiplash. In one meeting his sister had gone from the Fairy Godmother to the most wanted person in the fairy-tale world.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Conner said, putting himself between the council members. “That’s *Alex* we’re talking about! She had a breakdown—what’s the big deal?”

Conner wasn’t the only one anxious to know. The Fairy Council, Jack, Froggy, Goldilocks, and Red huddled around Emerelda.

“We all know Alex is a very powerful person, perhaps the most powerful fairy we’ve ever known,” Emerelda said. “Her magic is fueled by heart, and whatever happened in the Fairy Godmother’s chambers between her and the Masked Man five months ago has broken her emotionally. If we don’t stop her—if she can’t get a grip on her emotions—she may lose control of herself forever.”

“Okay,” Conner said. The grave look in Emerelda’s eyes was scaring him. “Then what can I do?”

“Find her before it’s too late,” she said. “I’ve seen this happen only once before. All it took was a broken heart to turn one of the most gifted fairies I had ever known into a foul and dangerous creature. The situation was very different, but all the signs are there.”

Conner gulped. “Who was it?” he asked.

Emerelda paused, hesitating to tell him. “*The Enchantress,*” she said.

Chapter Four

GOOSE ON THE LAM

Alex opened her eyes. To her astonishment, she was standing on a cloud in the center of a ferocious storm. Rain blew from every direction and soaked her to the bone. She wrapped her arms around her body and shivered in the freezing wind. Lightning flashed in the clouds below her feet. The thunder was deafening, as if dozens of cannons were being fired all around her.

She had no idea where she was or how she had gotten there. Her memory was spotty at best. The last thing Alex remembered was standing in the grand hall of the Fairy Palace. She was arguing with the Fairy Council about the Masked Man… the longer their discussion went on, the angrier Alex became… Emerelda questioned Conner about Alex's reliability, and that's when her memory faded completely.… She could recall only quick glimpses of what had happened, but it didn't take long to put the pieces together.

"Oh, no!" Alex gasped. *"What have I done?"*

It was like recalling a nightmare. The Fairy Council had dethroned her as Fairy Godmother. Alex's anger took control of her body and she retaliated *by attacking them!*

The more lucid she became, the more the storm around her began to calm and dissipate. The rain stopped and the cold wind came to a halt. Alex looked around, trying to determine her whereabouts, but all she saw were thick gray clouds for miles and miles.

Alex chose a direction and walked through clouds like fluffy quicksand. In the distance she could barely make out the silhouette of a massive structure with several towers. When she squinted she saw a large wooden door. Alex recognized this place immediately.

"It's the giant's castle!"

Alex's stomach dropped. The castle instantly reminded her of the time she and her friends narrowly escaped being clawed and eaten by the giant cat that lived inside. Despite her initial instinct to run in the opposite direction, Alex figured the castle might be the best place to go, given the circumstances. She doubted the Fairy Council would look for her *there.* Perhaps that's why she had taken herself to the sky all along.

She continued toward the castle, and her feet eventually found a solid path that curved up to the castle's enormous front door. Alex almost crawled under the door, like she and her friends had before, but luckily she had learned a few tricks since then. She waved her hand over the door, and it began to open.

Once the door had opened wide enough, Alex went inside and the door shut behind her. The castle was exactly as Alex remembered. The stone tiles of the floor were the size of swimming pools. Each step of the massive staircase was the height of a building. You could probably fit the entire Fairy Palace into the entrance hall alone.

However, one thing was very different. The last time she was in the castle, the floor had been covered in hundreds of bird carcasses (victims of the giant cat's appetite), but now it was completely clean. In fact, the whole castle had a very "lived-in" feel.

Alex gulped nervously—more than just the giant cat was living in the castle now.

She walked into the room to the right of the entrance hall and found the castle's sitting room. Each piece of furniture was the size of a house. A pile of timbered trees burned in the fireplace like logs. An enormous armchair had been placed close to the fire. Its back was facing Alex, but she could tell someone or something was sitting in it.

"Squaaa?"

Alex jumped. Perched at the very top of the armchair was a familiar goose. The bird was enormous, but still dwarfed in comparison to the giant's castle.

"Lester?" Alex said. "What are you doing here?"

The goose ruffled his feathers excitedly. *"Squaaa!"*

"What is it, boy?" a raspy voice said from the chair. Alex sighed with relief; she was among friends.

"Mother Goose? Is that you?" Alex called up.

“Alex?” Mother Goose said. “What are you doing here?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“Lester, be a dear and help our girl up here,” Mother Goose instructed.

Lester glided to the ground and Alex climbed on his back. He flew her to the seat of the armchair, which was like a balcony looking over the fireplace. Mother Goose sat in a rocking chair, her large traveling basket at her side, and she sipped from a large thermos that was undoubtedly filled with her favorite bubbly beverage.

“HISSSSSSSSS!”

Alex shrieked. The giant cat was seated on the armrest of the chair. He glared at her and arched his back as he hissed. Obviously, he remembered Alex from when they first met. He raised a paw and extended his claws, ready to strike.

“Easy, George Clooney,” Mother Goose said to the cat. “She’s a friend—she’s not going to harm you! Don’t make me spray you with water again!”

The giant cat retracted his claws and slouched, still sending Alex a nasty look. She was surprised to see how obedient he was. “Is the cat *yours* now?” she asked.

“I was never planning on it, but someone has to teach this giant sack of gluten some manners,” Mother Goose said. “He almost ate Lester the first time we came here. But I put him on a strict fish and grain diet.”

The cat glanced at Lester with hunger in his eyes. Clearly he was still tempted.

“And you named him George Clooney?” Alex asked with a laugh.

“Yes, after one of my favorite boyfriends from the Otherworld,” Mother Goose said.

“He was your *boyfriend*?” Alex said with a raised eyebrow. Of all the stories Alex had heard over the years, how had Mother Goose managed to keep that to herself?

“Oh, I keep forgetting you’re from the Otherworld.” Mother Goose chuckled. “An old gal can dream, can’t she?” She snapped her fingers and another rocking chair appeared beside hers. “Have a seat, kiddo! It’s good to see you.”

Alex had a seat, also happy to be reunited. For the last couple of months, Mother Goose sightings had become fewer and fewer. For some reason, she

avoided the Fairy Palace as much as possible these days, and the twins were worried the day would come when she disappeared forever.

"We haven't seen you in months," Alex said. "Is this where you've been hiding?"

"It is," Mother Goose said with a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry I've been MIA, Alex—I miss you and your brother like crazy, but it's difficult being around the palace now that your grandmother is gone."

Alex knew exactly how she felt, so she couldn't blame her. "Believe me, I know. Why come here of all places?"

"I love this place," Mother Goose said. "It's got high ceilings for Lester to fly around, it's very quiet, it has great views on a clear day, and the late giant and I have similar tastes in bubbly." She pointed to the giant's teacart in the corner of the room, where a dozen bottles taller than Alex were filled with Mother Goose's favorite drink. "That's a lifetime supply for me!"

"We sure miss seeing you around—will you ever come back?"

Mother Goose hesitated to answer. "I don't know. I haven't decided. Every night I hope I'll wake up the next day with the desire to rejoin humanity, but no luck so far. I just need more time, I guess."

Mother Goose took a long swig of bubbly. Alex noticed a small leather-bound book resting on her lap.

"What are you reading?" Alex asked.

"Oh, this?" she said. "It's just my old diary. Boy, I've had some adventures in my time. I used to write down everything—I always hoped one day when I was old or finally locked up for good, there would be someone there who would appreciate it."

"May I?" Alex asked, reaching for the diary.

Mother Goose smiled and handed it to her. Alex flipped through the old pages. There were hundreds and hundreds of entries dating back hundreds of years into the Otherworld and the fairy-tale world. There were pictures, flowers, leaves, and letters folded in between the pages.

"You've certainly lived," Alex said, impressed by the artifact.

"Certainly did," Mother Goose said. "Certainly did…"

Her choice of words concerned Alex. *"Did?"* she said. "Why are you talking like it's over? You're not ready to throw in the towel yet, are you?"

Mother Goose sighed and her gaze drifted to the fireplace. She seemed sad, at least sadder than Alex had ever seen her before.

“Getting old is not for wimps, I’ll tell you that much,” Mother Goose said. “When I was young, I wanted to live forever. There wasn’t a bridge I didn’t want to cross, or a stone I wanted to leave unturned. Then I reached a certain age and everything started disappearing. My friends started to die one at a time until none of them were left. The world is always changing, but one day you wake up and realize that it’s changed *without* you—and there’s no chance of catching up to it. Your adventures are over, and you find yourself all alone with nothing left but the memories. Then you just wait… and wait… and wait until it’s your turn to meet your maker—or ‘return to magic,’ as your grandmother always put it. And when that day comes, you pray someone you know will be waiting for you when you get there.”

It broke Alex’s heart to hear her say such a thing. “But, Mother Goose, that can’t be true,” she said. “You have more life in your pinkie than most people do in their entire body. The adventures aren’t over, they’ll just be different.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Mother Goose said with a smile. “I certainly hope that’s the case. Now it’s your turn—what brings you to the Casa de Giant?”

Alex closed her eyes tightly, willing herself not to cry. “I’ve been *ungodmothered* by the Fairy Council. I’ve ruined everything.”

Mother Goose choked on a swig of bubbly. *“What?”* She coughed. “Can they do that?”

“Apparently so.”

“Why in the world would they do that?” Mother Goose said. “You’re one of the brightest fairies this world has ever seen!”

“They believe my search for the Masked Man has gone too far and they think I’ve become destructive,” Alex said.

“Oh, I doubt that,” Mother Goose said. “They’ve always thought *doing nothing* is better than doing something that *might* be harmful or make them look bad. But that’s politics for you.”

“No—it’s true,” Alex admitted. “Lately, whenever I get overwhelmed, I completely lose control of myself and my powers. I attacked the council with lightning when they made the decision! It was like someone else had taken over my body and I was just watching from inside.”

“Wow,” Mother Goose said. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

“Maybe they were right to demote me,” Alex said, suddenly filling with self-doubt. “Maybe it’s best if I’m not the Fairy Godmother. Now they can focus on finding the twelve missing children from the Corner Kingdom and the twelve missing children from the Charming Kingdom.”

“I remember another time when a bunch of young people went missing—we called it *Woodstock*, but that’s a different story,” Mother Goose said. “You’re not going to quit looking for the Masked Man, though, are you?”

Alex shook her head. “I can’t stop,” she said. “No one believes me, but I know he’s my dad. No matter how many times the Fairy Council tries to convince me I was just hallucinating, I know what I saw. He had my dad’s eyes, his nose, his mouth… who else could it have been? I won’t be able to function properly until he’s found.”

Mother Goose looked at Alex with large sympathetic eyes. There was so much she wished she could tell her, but she had made the late Fairy Godmother a promise shortly before she passed away, a promise she intended to keep.

Mother Goose took Alex’s hand. “I believe you, honey.”

Alex looked up at her with big bright eyes. “You do?”

“I’ve seen some pretty incredible things in my lifetime,” Mother Goose said. “They didn’t always make sense and they weren’t always what people wanted to hear, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t happen. If you say you saw your father, *then you saw your father*—end of discussion.”

Alex was so thankful someone was on her side that it brought tears to her eyes. “But what do I do now? I’m the most wanted person in the kingdoms. The council’s hunting me down as we speak.”

Mother Goose rolled her eyes and waved the thought off. “If I had a nickel for every time the council got their panties in a ruffle over me, I could afford to pay back all my gambling debts in both worlds. If I were you I’d consider it a blessing. You’re no longer the Fairy Godmother or associated with the Fairy Council—*great!* That means you can start playing by your own rules. Let people be afraid of you for now; that fear will only turn into admiration when you find the Masked Man and prove you’ve been right all along. And what will the council have to say when that happens? They’ll never be able to hold you back again.”

Mother Goose took another swig of bubbly and nodded, content with her advice.

“And you know what?” Mother Goose added. “I’m going to help you.”

“You will?” Alex asked.

A mischievous smile grew on her face. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to see those uppity, colorful know-it-alls get proven wrong. Count me in.”

For the first time in a very long while, Alex smiled. “And we’ll be playing by our own rules. I like the sound of that.”

Chapter Five

POTIONS AND PREDICTIONS

A small wagon traveled through the woods in the dead of night. It was pulled by a single mule and transported three women: a brunette, a redhead, and a blonde. The women were middle aged, but they were so tired from traveling, they looked much older.

The brunette woman had never steered a wagon before and struggled to keep her grip around the reins. The redheaded woman glanced back and forth from a map to the path ahead, and the blonde woman held a lantern to illuminate the woods. They watched the trees nervously—not afraid of what they might see, but of who might see them.

None of them had ever been so far away from home, and they hoped no one from home would ever know where they were headed.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" the blonde fussed.

"I'm following the map as best as I can!" the redhead said.

"Quiet, you two!" the brunette whispered. "Look! It's the Dwarf Forests!"

After traveling all night, they had reached the border between the Corner Kingdom and the Dwarf Forests. They were certain because the trees ahead were thicker and eerier than any woods they had ever seen. Just the sight of it sent chills down their spines.

"Are we sure we want to go in *there*?" the blonde said, getting cold feet.

"The witch's house is just a little ways inside," the brunette said. "We'll be there in no time."

The wagon crossed a small bridge and traveled into the unsettling forest. A mile or so in, the women found a house sitting on the edge of a river. It had a tall hay roof and a watermill that turned slowly as the river ran through it. It was exactly as it had been described.

The women helped one another down from the wagon and tied their

mule to a tree. They linked arms and cautiously approached the front door of the house. Each woman nudged the other, but they were all afraid to knock on the door.

“May I help you?” said a voice behind them.

The women screamed and turned around. Another woman was standing behind them. She was beautiful, with dark hair and bright red lips. She wore long black robes with golden trim and snakeskin high-heeled boots. She would have looked like any other woman except for the large ram-like horns that grew out of her head and curled along the sides of her face.

The women figured this was the witch they were looking for.

“Are… are… are you Morina? The beauty witch?” the blonde asked with a trembling jaw.

“That depends,” the witch responded with a fierce scowl. “What are you doing here?”

“We don’t mean any harm,” the redhead said, using her friends as a shield. “A mutual acquaintance recommended your… *services.*”

Morina’s scowl slowly morphed into a smile. “Oh, you’re *customers*! Welcome, ladies. Forgive me for being rude; one can never be too careful when a witch hunt is on the horizon. Please, come inside.”

Morina pointed to the door and it flew open. She put her arms around the women and escorted them inside her home.

The front room of the house was an elegant shop. It had marble floors, a crystal chandelier, and pillars supporting the high ceiling. Everything was white, including a large desk and chair in the center of the room. Shelves holding small glass bottles filled with colorful liquids lined the walls. The women felt like children in a candy shop.

“Now, ladies, what brings you to my neck of the woods?” Morina asked.

“We heard you’ve invented a potion that reverses the signs of aging,” the brunette said.

“The rumors are true,” Morina said. “Only, it’s not just *one* potion. My shelves are filled with concoctions guaranteed to rejuvenate, revitalize, or refresh—depending on your specific needs.”

The women looked around the room as if they had died and gone to heaven. Could the potions around them really restore their youth? It seemed too good to be true.

“Are these the potions you sold to the Evil Queen?” asked the blonde.

“We heard you were one of the beauticians who provided her with beauty regimens.”

“Indeed,” Morina said. “For years she was my exclusive client and a dear friend. It’s a shame what happened to her, but I assure you, her fate should not reflect on the quality of my products.”

“How do we know your potions work?” the redhead asked.

Morina’s smile grew; this was always her favorite question when making a sale. Morina crossed to the corner of the room and pulled on a tassel. Curtains parted on the wall, revealing a large mirror with a golden frame.

“Do any of you know what this is?” Morina asked.

“A mirror,” the blonde said.

“Yes, but it’s not an ordinary mirror,” Morina said. “When someone steps in front of it, they will see the reflection of who they are *inside*. It was a gift from the Evil Queen herself, who, as you know, had a fascination with magic mirrors. They call it a Mirror of Truth.”

Morina stepped in front of the mirror and the women gasped. Her reflection transformed into a hideous young woman with warts, a hunchback, and a clubfoot. The ram-like horns were the only similarity the witch and the reflection shared.

“But that couldn’t possibly be you,” the brunette said.

“It *was*,” Morina said. “My grandfather was a troll, so naturally with witch and troll blood in my veins, I was destined for ugliness. I constantly had my heart broken by men who couldn’t love me because of my appearance. But instead of dwelling in self-pity, I decided to do something about it. I spent years of my young life mixing and matching potions, creating concoctions that altered my looks little by little until I was satisfied. And since my own transformation was so successful, I decided to share my creations with others… *for a price*.”

She turned back to them and the ugly reflection faded away. Morina took each woman gently by the hand and placed her in front of the mirror. They covered their eyes, afraid of what the mirror might show.

“Go on,” she encouraged. “Take a look. I promise you have nothing to be afraid of.”

The women looked up at the Mirror of Truth and their eyes filled with tears. Three young, beautiful, and vibrant women stared back at them—

reflections they hadn’t seen in decades.

“Why be another victim of nature’s cruelties when you can put a stop to it?” Morina said. “Let the women inside you be reborn so the world can see who you truly are. With the help of my potions, you can be reunited with the beauty and self-confidence that time has stolen from you.”

The witch didn’t have to say any more—the women were sold.

“Now, one at a time, tell me what each of you is specifically looking for,” Morina said.

One by one, each woman stepped forward and confessed her deepest and darkest insecurities to the witch. Luckily for them, Morina had a product for everything. After she determined what products they needed, the bottles flew off the shelves and into three white bags that appeared on the desk. By the time Morina was done diagnosing the women’s needs, each bag was filled with dozens of potions.

“How much is this going to cost us?” the brunette asked.

“It’s a different amount for each customer,” Morina said. “I charge half of your individual fortunes to use my potions.”

The women eyed one another. They had been told the fee was expensive, but none of them thought it would cost them *this* much. Luckily, they were prepared to pay any price. They looked back into the Mirror of Truth for inspiration and each placed a heavy bag of coins on Morina’s desk.

“Excellent! Now, let me warn you,” Morina said. “The potions have been bewitched to reverse their intended effects if a customer is lying about her finances.”

The women grew paranoid and handed over all the money they had in their possession. A satisfied smirk spread across Morina’s face and she slid her proceeds into the large drawer of the desk.

“Thank you, ladies,” she said. “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you.”

Morina escorted the women out of her home and waved them off as they traveled away on the wagon. When she turned back to her home, she noticed something odd. The front door was swinging ever so slightly, as if someone had quickly run inside when she wasn’t looking.

Morina charged into her house horns first, slamming the door behind her. There was no visible sign of an intruder, but she knew she wasn’t alone.

“Show yourself!” she demanded.

When there was no movement, Morina spun her finger in a quick circle. An aggressive whirlwind appeared and twirled around her shop. It found a man crouching behind her desk and trapped him inside its vortex. The whirlwind spun the man so fast, he couldn’t make a sound.

The witch sighed and then snapped her fingers once she realized who it was. The whirlwind disappeared and dropped the Masked Man at her feet.

“Lloyd,” Morina said. She may have been the only person in the fairy-tale world who could recognize the late Fairy Godmother’s son in his disguise. Over the years she had spent so much time detesting every fiber of his being, she recognized the pale blue eyes under the mask immediately. They had history together, history that didn’t end well.

“Hello, Morina,” the Masked Man said. He was so dizzy, he almost became sick and had difficulty standing.

“You pathetic excuse of a man,” the witch said. “I knew it was only a matter of time before you slithered your way back into my life. What are you doing here?”

The Masked Man hesitated to respond, knowing the answer would infuriate her. “I came to ask for your help,” he said.

“MY HELP?” Morina yelled, outraged by his audacity. “You think you can sneak into my home and request a favor from me after what you did?”

“I understand why you’d be angry,” the Masked Man said.

“Anger is nothing compared to the feelings I have toward you,” she said. “You *lied* to me! You *stole* from me!”

“Please, allow me to explain—”

“There’s nothing to explain!” Morina said. “We had an arrangement! I supplied you with hundreds of love potions! In return, you promised me a king-sized fortune, but you failed to hold your end of the bargain!”

“I know I didn’t deliver it as fast as I promised, but that doesn’t mean it can’t happen,” he said. “Please hear me out! If you help me now, I swear I’ll be able to give you a *kingdom* in return!”

“You are the scum of the earth and I will not listen to another word you say! Get out of my house before I drop you into the river piece by piece!”

Morina pointed to the door and it flung open. The Masked Man reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the small blue potion bottle, holding it up like a badge.

“What is *that?*” she asked.

“It’s a potion my mother created when I was a child,” the Masked Man said. “This small vial is what I’ve been after my entire life. It could very well be the most powerful potion in the world. Just a few drops turn any book into a portal to the world it possesses.”

Morina grunted and rolled her eyes—she couldn’t believe the Masked Man was still feeding her more lies.

“I know it seems impossible,” the Masked Man said. “Watch this.”

He removed a small golden book from his jacket pocket and placed it on her desk. Morina read the title: *A Boy’s First Dog.* The Masked Man opened the book to the first page and carefully poured three drops of the potion on it.

As if the book had suddenly transformed into a spotlight, the pages glowed and a bright beam of light shot directly out of it toward the ceiling.

“Look inside it,” the Masked Man said eagerly. *“Please.”*

Morina reluctantly leaned into the beam. Her head was no longer in her shop. Everywhere she looked, she saw words spinning around her. She tried to read them, but they moved too fast. The words randomly dispersed and morphed into the objects they described, gaining color and texture. Soon Morina found herself in a pleasant field covered in wildflowers. In the distance, a young farm boy happily played fetch with a puppy.

“My goodness.” Morina gasped and leaned out of the beam. He was telling the truth.

“Remarkable, isn’t it?” the Masked Man said.

Morina slid into the chair behind her desk—he had her attention. “You have five minutes. Explain yourself. What are you planning to do with this potion? And why do you need my assistance?”

The Masked Man put the potion and the book back into his pocket and had a seat on her desk.

“Long story short, ever since I was a boy it’s been my life’s mission to overthrow my mother and the fairies,” he explained. “And this potion is going to help me achieve it.”

“That’s a peculiar goal for a child to have,” Morina pointed out.

“It was a peculiar situation,” he said. “My mother always favored my older brother, John. I knew he was destined to take her place and he was known as her *heir of magic*. So I started fantasizing about a world where I

was the leader. They were just childish daydreams, but somehow my mother discovered these dreams. Fearing that one day I might act on them, she committed the cruelest act a mother could commit on her own son."

"Did she send you to bed without dinner?" Morina said with a laugh.

"She drained all the magic from my body, turning me into a human," the Masked Man said, and his voice cracked as he recalled it. "I was punished for crimes I had never committed. It was my birthright to participate in magic, and she stripped it from me. So I vowed one day to destroy her and everything she had created.

"I knew the only way I could defeat her was by regaining power, not in a magical sense, but in a military sense; I needed an army. A typical army of men would never do. I needed one that was more powerful than any force this world had ever seen. By using the potion my mother created, I could recruit an army of *literary villains*. I could control and unleash what the world had only seen in their nightmares. I could be unstoppable."

The more farfetched his plan became, the less it interested Morina. "Then why did you ask me for love potions?" she asked.

"By the time I developed this plan, I had been banished from the Fairy Kingdom," the Masked Man said. "I knew there was no way I could sneak into my mother's chambers without a colossal distraction to occupy the fairies—*I needed a dragon egg*. I searched for one for years, researching everything I could about the beasts. It led me to the Snow Queen, who had preserved one from the Dragon Age. When she turned me down, I knew I would need better resources to obtain one.

"I used the love potions you provided on Little Bo Peep. My plan was to seduce and marry her, and then convince her to challenge the Red Riding Hood throne. Once Little Bo was elected queen, I would have been king. I could give you what I promised and form a crusade to find a dragon egg."

"How did you wind up in Pinocchio Prison instead?" Morina asked.

"Because I got impatient and paranoid," the Masked Man said. "Manipulating Little Bo was much harder than I expected. So, in a moment of weakness, I snuck into the Fairy Palace and tried to steal the potion by myself. I was caught and my mother sentenced me to life in prison. She gave me this sack to wear over my head so no one would know I was her son.

"Ten long years later, an army from the Otherworld led by a man called

General Marquis invaded the prison. We shared the same goal—destroy the fairies—so the general was easy to convince that a dragon was what they needed to do so. I knew his army and a dragon would never be enough to destroy the fairies, but I knew it would distract them long enough so I could get my hands on the potion."

"Your objective is as insane as you are," she said. "What makes you think these literary characters will listen to you?"

"I'm rather persuasive," the Masked Man boasted. "The Grande Armée was proof of that."

"You still haven't told me how I fit into all of this," Morina said.

"Oh yes, I'm getting there," he said. "When I retrieved the potion, I discovered all my old books had been relocated. I need your help to find them. Once we locate them I can begin recruiting the army I spoke of!"

"And how am I supposed to find these books?"

"Do you still have that crystal ball?" the Masked Man asked. "If I recall, you used to be very good at giving predictions."

"Fortune-telling is a hobby I gave up a long time ago," Morina said. "I'm a potion mistress now. It's much more lucrative."

"Understood and respected. But, Morina, if you help me locate these books, I promise you I will give you any kingdom you want when I've conquered the world."

His offer lit a spark of excitement inside of her and she was almost embarrassed to acknowledge it. This wasn't the first time she had been offered a kingdom.

"The Evil Queen was going to declare me as her successor once her huntsman killed Snow White," Morina said. "Obviously, it didn't work out in my favor. So I'm not very eager to get my hopes up again."

The Masked Man got to his hands and knees. "Then please look into your crystal ball for validation. Let it convince you that my plan will work if you help me."

As much as she despised him, Morina knew it wouldn't hurt to humor him. Worst-case scenario, the Masked Man would continue being a pebble in her shoe. But the proposition of her own kingdom was something she couldn't let go to waste.

She stood and crossed to a door in the back of her shop. A dozen locks bolted and chained the door shut. She waved her hand over the locks and

one by one they unlocked, unbolted, and unchained themselves. The door opened and the Masked Man saw a staircase that led down into a dark basement. He stood to follow her.

Morina held up her hand. “Absolutely no one is allowed in my basement but me, understood?”

The Masked Man knew there was no negotiating this and nodded. Morina climbed down the stairs and the door shut behind her. The Masked Man paced around the shop as he waited, inspecting and pocketing the products Morina had for sale. A few moments later the door opened and Morina appeared with a crystal ball.

She placed the crystal ball on her desk and had a seat. The witch blew off a thick layer of dust covering the ball.

“This may take a moment,” Morina said. “It’s been a long time.”

The witch stared into the crystal ball, deep in concentration. White clouds appeared inside it and began to spiral. Glimpses of the future began to show themselves to her.

“Interesting,” Morina said with large eyes.

“What do you see?” the Masked Man asked, desperate to know.

“I see winged creatures, ruthless men, and soldiers bearing symbols,” she said. “It appears your madness will pay off. You *will* recruit a literary army, overthrow the fairies, and take over the world.”

The Masked Man jumped into the air and cried with joy. His life’s work would not be a waste. Despite his mother’s efforts to stop him, he would obtain the power he had desperately desired since childhood.

Morina squinted as the crystal ball began showing her something else, something she had never seen before.

“What do you see now?” the Masked Man asked. Her expression made him nervous.

“I’m not entirely sure,” she said. “I see buildings that stretch into the sky… machines of extreme capabilities… billions of people, all of difference races…”

“I know what that is,” he said with a frown. “You’re looking at the Otherworld.”

Morina was so fascinated by what she saw, she barely heard him. Images of the Great Wall of China, the Eiffel Tower, the Nile, and New York City flashed before her eyes. She had heard references and rumors of

the Otherworld before, but until now she never could have imagined how grand it was.

“Impressive,” Morina said. “This world is operated completely without magic.”

“Just man and machines,” the Masked Man said. “My mother and brother loved it dearly, but it never interested me.”

Clearly, Morina was mesmerized by it. “So someone capable of magic could potentially do very well there…,” she said softly. “They could be a *god*.”

“Potentially, I suppose,” the Masked Man said. “But it’s a miserable place—destined to destroy itself, if you ask me.”

The images in the crystal ball changed, distracting Morina from her new fixation.

“Are you aware you have *family* in the Otherworld?” she asked.

The Masked Man crossed his arms and let out a long and aggrieved sigh. “Don’t remind me. It’s where my late brother lived and where his children are from.”

“Your *family* could pose a threat to you in the near future,” Morina said.

“I can handle my niece and nephew,” the Masked Man said. “They’re young and naïve—my niece is even convinced I’m her late father. They’ll be the first to die once I’m in power.”

The witch was being vague on purpose. Alex and Conner weren’t the family she was referring to. Apparently, the Masked Man had family he was unaware of, and knowing this could be very useful to her.

“Now that you’ve seen I’m destined to form the army, can you locate my books for me?” the Masked Man asked.

Morina looked harder into the crystal ball and the location became clearer and clearer.

“I see a library in a castle,” she said. “A few years ago, your mother gave your books away as a gift for helping her grandchildren. This castle is filled with decorations. It looks like the servants are preparing for a celebration as we speak. A *wedding*, it seems.”

“It must be Red Riding Hood’s wedding to King Charlie,” the Masked Man said. *“My books are in their castle!”*

Morina looked up from the crystal ball for the first time. “*King Charlie* you said? As in the *long lost Charming prince*?”

“Yes. He’s a king now,” the Masked Man said. “He was elected king by the people of the Little Bo Peep Republic after Little Bo died.”

Morina’s cheeks flushed. “Well, isn’t that *something*…,” she said with a tight jaw.

The Masked Man couldn’t tell if she was angered, saddened, or both by the news. Rather than questioning her reaction, he composed his plan to retrieve the books.

“The books shouldn’t be difficult to steal while the wedding is under way,” he said. “The entire kingdom will be attending it.”

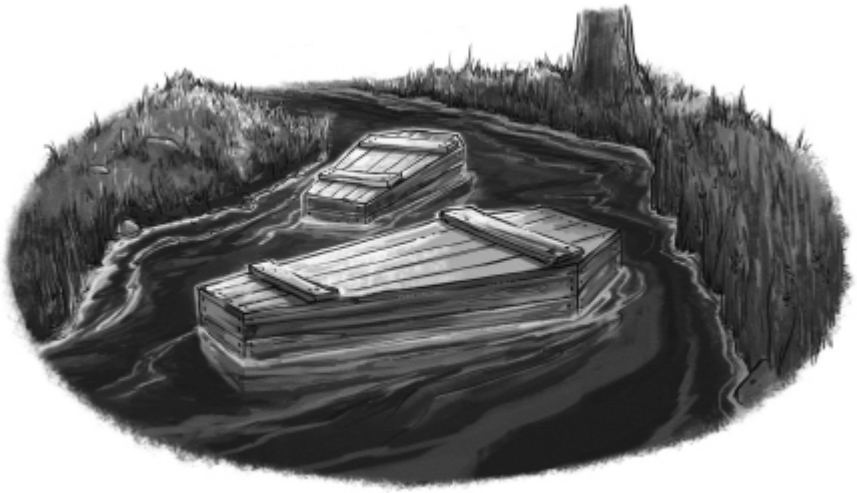
Morina stared off into the distance, making plans of her own.

“The wedding won’t be enough,” she said. “You’ll need another *dragon* of sorts to make sure the kingdom’s attention is completely captivated. And I know just the thing.…”

Morina smiled at him. If the Masked Man were wiser, he would have questioned her sudden cooperation, but the only thing on his mind was getting to those books and forming his army.

“Thank you, Morina. I swear to you, when I am in power, you can have whatever kingdom you want.”

For the first time in her life, Morina was glad the Masked Man had stopped by. While looking into her crystal ball she had seen much more than his future. Morina had discovered a world of opportunities for herself, and if she played her cards right, she could get much more out of this partnership than a *kingdom*.



Chapter Six

THE BAD FAIRIES

Conner and his friends returned to Dead Man's Creek much sooner than any of them would have liked. He and Jack rummaged through piles of the destroyed Witches' Brew while Red and Goldilocks searched the woods nearby. Porridge and her son, Oats (who was nearly the size of his mother now), helped Conner and Jack by kicking over the larger pieces of the wrecked tavern.

"I only see sticks," Jack said. "Are we looking for anything in particular?"

"*Anything,*" Conner said desperately. "Anything that could lead us to the Masked Man. Alex isn't going to stop looking for him because the Fairy Council forbade her to—she'll be even more determined to prove herself now. We've got to get to him before she does. I'm afraid of what she might do when she finds him."

Conner tried to tell himself he had done everything he could to help his sister, but he knew that wasn't true. If he had been honest with her from the beginning about her obsession with the Masked Man, perhaps they wouldn't be in this predicament.

Now, on top of being overwhelmed, Alex was all alone and probably thought the entire world was against her (including her brother). Conner just wanted to find her so he could help her rebuild everything that had been lost, but even if they found her, he wouldn't know where to start.

"It's such a shame," Red said, shaking her head as she searched the ground. "The people you depend on and trust always disappoint you the most."

Goldilocks nodded. "I agree. I can't believe the Fairy Council did that to Alex, especially after all she's done for the kingdoms. Who cares if the Masked Man is her father or not; you'd think they would learn to trust her

instincts by now.”

Red glanced at her awkwardly. “The Fairy Council? I was talking about the caterers for the wedding. They canceled on us *this* morning. Do you know how difficult it’ll be to find someone to cook for five hundred people with two days’ notice?”

Goldilocks found Red more annoying than ever when she talked about her wedding. The last thing Red needed was *more* entitlement.

“I’m glad Jack and I had a small wedding,” Goldilocks said. “No fight or fuss, just simple and quick.”

Red rolled her eyes. “I suppose it was easy sending invitations since your *guest list* and the *most wanted list* were one and the same. Unfortunately, when you’re respected as much as Charlie and I are, you have no choice but to throw an extravagant but elegant celebration. Our people are *depending* on a spectacular wedding—it teaches them how to dream.”

Goldilocks took a deep breath, fighting the temptation to throw something at her.

“If you still have wedding plans to make, why are you here?” Goldilocks asked.

“I don’t like planning anything without Charlie, and he was busy with a bunch of *king nonsense* today. Apparently the citizens are very anxious about what he’ll rename the kingdom now that he’s on the throne.”

“Is he going to name it after himself, like you and Little Bo did?” Goldilocks asked.

“No,” Red was disappointed to report. “He’s determined to give the kingdom a name it can keep beyond his reign. I believe he’s settled on *the Center Kingdom*. It’s a bit boring, if you ask me, but I suppose the kingdom will save a fortune not constantly reprinting maps.”

Red suddenly stopped in her tracks and pressed her finger to her lips. Goldilocks was very familiar with this pose—Red did it every time she was about to ask a favor.

“I almost forgot,” Red said. “I have something I wanted to ask you, Goldie.”

“Oh, no,” Goldilocks sighed.

“Since Alex will *still* most likely be in hiding at the time of the wedding, will you please be my *matron of honor*?” Red asked excitedly. “*Oh, please*

say yes! I can't think of anyone else I've been through more with. We're like *sisters*—the kind of sisters who have almost killed each other at one point in time."

Goldilocks stared at her blankly for a few moments and then burst into tears. Red became teary-eyed at the sight and threw her arms around her.

"I didn't know you would be so touched!" Red said.

"I'm not," Goldilocks said, and wiped her eyes on Red's sleeve. "It sounds awful—but I can't think of a reason to say no. And everything seems so much worse when you're pregnant."

Red quickly dropped the embrace and joined the boys.

"I'm sorry, Red! That was rude of me. Of course I'll be your matron of honor," Goldilocks apologized. "I can't filter a word I say, because of the hormones."

Their search for clues leading to the Masked Man continued for a couple more hours, until Conner's frustration got the best of him. He grunted loudly and began kicking the debris around him.

"This is pointless!" he yelled. "There's nothing here! We've got to look somewhere else."

"This is the only location where we've seen the Masked Man in five months," Jack said. "Where else can we search?"

Conner didn't have an answer. He walked down to the creek and sat on a boulder as he thought it over. He looked into the sky for clarity, but instead he found a distraction. What he saw was very strange, and he rubbed his eyes to make sure it wasn't a hallucination.

"Guys?" Conner said to the others. "What's *that?*"

A *book* was flying through the air—and it appeared to be flying toward *him*. As the book flew closer, Conner saw three tiny objects hovering around it: one purple, one green, and one orange. Each had a pair of colorful wings.

"Are those insects? I didn't bring any repellant," Red said.

"No, they're fairies!" Goldilocks said.

"INCOMING!" one of the fairies yelled. *"We can't hold it any longer!"*

The book slipped from their tiny grip and smacked Conner right in the face. He temporarily lost sight in his left eye, but when his vision returned, he saw three fairies land on a boulder beside him. They were sweating profusely and out of breath.

“So sorry, Conner!” one of the fairies said. “We’ve carried that all the way from the Fairy Kingdom!”

Conner instantly recognized her—although he hadn’t seen her in years.

“Trix? Is that you?” he asked.

The fairy had dark hair and blue wings and wore a dress made of purple leaves. She smiled up at him and batted her big eyes, so pleased that he remembered her name.

“Hello, Conner!” Trix said. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you! These are my friends Merkle and Noodle.”

She gestured to the other fairies and they waved at him. Noodle was plump for her size and her stomach stuck out of her orange dress. Merkle was as thin as a pencil and glanced around nervously as she vigorously rubbed her hands together.

“We shouldn’t have done this!” Merkle said. “We’re going to get into so much trouble!”

“Merkle, calm down before your hands catch on fire,” Noodle said. “No one knows we’re here!”

“What *are* you doing here?” Conner asked.

Trix flew up to his face so she could look him in the eye. “We know about your sister!”

“Trix, the entire world knows about her,” Conner said. “Overnight she went from the Fairy Godmother to the most wanted person alive. It’s pretty newsworthy.”

“No, I mean we were *there* last night at the Fairy Council meeting!” Trix said. “We saw the entire thing!”

“We were sitting in the windowsill; no one ever notices us there,” Noodle said with a wink. “We’ve never missed a Fairy Council meeting—it gives us something to talk to the other fairies about. We know all about the Masked Man and we think Alex is right to be worried about him!”

“We shouldn’t have been there!” Merkle said, and covered her face in shame.

“And most of the fairies we’ve talked to are on her side!” Trix said. “We think it’s the council who blew things out of proportion!”

Conner was glad his sister had support from someone.

“I appreciate that, Trix, but it’s very complicated—”

“The council will banish us from the Fairy Kingdom if they find out

what we've stolen!" Merkle suddenly exclaimed. "We're bad fairies! VERY bad fairies!"

The poor thing looked as if she was about to have a heart attack.

"Okay, *pause!*" Conner said. "What did you guys steal?"

Trix and Noodle eyed each other mischievously.

"Remember the time you and your sister saved me from banishment?" Trix asked. "Well, it's been three years, but I've always planned on returning the favor. So I wanted to help your sister prove herself, and Noodle and Merkle agreed to assist me."

"Biggest regret of my life!" Merkle said.

"At the council meeting, your sister mentioned that the Masked Man stole a potion from the late Fairy Godmother—one he claimed was very powerful," Trix said. "The Fairy Council isn't worried about it, but if *Alex* is concerned, then *we're* concerned!"

"So, we did a little snooping around the Fairy Palace on her behalf and found out *she was right!*" Noodle said. "The late Fairy Godmother did invent a potion that was *very powerful*! And we think it's the one the Masked Man stole!"

Given the sources, Conner didn't want to get his hopes up, but what they were telling him was very intriguing. "How do you know this?"

"Just show him the book already! I can't stand the anticipation!" Merkle yelled, and her eyes almost bulged out of their sockets.

Trix and Noodle each grabbed a corner of the book they had transported and dropped it into Conner's lap. He opened it and flipped through the pages. It was filled with entries, sketches, and diagrams—it was a log of experiments. At first Conner assumed the neat and feminine handwriting belonged to a scientist, but it looked very familiar. It was the same handwriting Conner had seen in birthday cards and letters.

"This is my grandma's!" Conner said. "I've never seen it before."

"We found it tucked away in her former chambers at the palace," Trix said. "She recorded the ingredients of all the spells and potions she created inside it."

"And we stole it!" Merkle gasped. She had never been so ashamed.

"Yeah, we *stole* it!" Noodle said with a smile. She was tickled by their naughtiness.

"And we think the last entry is the potion the Masked Man stole!" Trix

said. “It’s *very* powerful—much more powerful than any other potion she created.”

Jack, Goldilocks, and Red gathered closer to Conner and the fairies, anxious to hear it themselves. Even Porridge and Oats seemed interested by what the fairies discovered.

“I think that’s worth taking a look at,” Jack said.

“I agree! Listen to the insects, Conner!” Red said.

The fairies fluttered with so much excitement, they buzzed like bees.

“Just read the last few pages! The part about the Portal Potion,” Trix instructed.

Conner turned to the last entry of his grandmother’s book and read about the creation.

The Portal Potion

Success! After weeks and weeks of trying, I’ve finally discovered the correct ingredients for the potion I’d hoped to create for my son! With just a few drops, the potion turns any written work into a portal to the world it describes. Even with my ability to create portals to and from the Otherworld, I never thought it would be possible to create a substance that allowed me passage to any world I wished.

My son will get to see the places and meet the characters he’s spent his whole childhood dreaming about! And best of all, I’ll get to watch his happiness soar as it happens!

The ingredients are much simpler than I imagined, but difficult to obtain. Their purposes are more metaphysical than practical, so it took some imagination to get the concoction right.

The first requirement is a branch from the oldest tree in the woods. *To bring the pages to life, I figured the potion would need the very thing that brought the paper to life in the first place. And what else has more life than an ancient tree?*

The second ingredient is a feather from the finest pheasant in the sky. *This will guarantee your potion has no limits, like a bird in flight. It will ensure you can travel to lands far and wide, beyond your imagination.*

The third component is a liquefied lock and key that belonged to a true love. *Just as this person unlocked your heart to a life of love, it will open the door of the literary dimensions your heart desires to experience.*

The fourth ingredient is two weeks of moonlight. *Just as the moon causes waves in the ocean, the moonlight will stir your potion to life.*

Last, but most important, give the potion a spark of magic to activate all the ingredients. Send it a beam of joy straight from your heart.

The potion does not work on any biographies or history books, but purely on works that have been imagined. Now, I must warn about the dangers of entering a fictional world:

1. Time only exists as long as the story continues. Be sure to leave the book before the story ends, or you may disappear as the story concludes.

2. Each world is made of only what the author describes. Do not expect the characters to have any knowledge of our world or the Otherworld.

3. Beware of the story's villains. Unlike people in our world or the Otherworld, most literary villains are created to be heartless and stripped of all morals, so do not expect any mercy should you cross paths with one.

4. The book you choose to enter will act as your entrance and exit. Be certain nothing happens to it; it is your only way out.

The Fairy Godmother had drawn an illustration of a small vial at the end of the entry. It looked exactly like the bottle Alex had seen the Masked Man steal, and exactly like the bottle Conner had seen him holding on the roof of the Witches' Brew.

"Holy smokes," Conner said. His head was spinning so fast, he felt like the ground was moving. "That's how he survived the fall when Alex made the tavern float! He activated that small book with the potion and must have gone inside it before he hit the ground!"

The situation was becoming clearer but more confusing at once. Was it possible Alex had been right this entire time?

"Your grandmother said she made the potion for her son—*your* father," Goldilocks said. "When the Masked Man stole it, he told Alex he was taking something that was *owed to him*."

Conner nodded. "I almost hate to say it—but Alex's story is starting to make sense," he said, although he still wasn't ready to believe the impossible.

"The Masked Man told the witches he needed their help finding something, and once he did, he could recruit an *army beyond their wildest imaginations*," Jack recalled. "He said it was a *collection of sorts* and was supposed to be with the potion, but the late Fairy Godmother had gotten rid of it."

"He must have been talking about a collection of books," Conner said. "We've got to find Alex and fill her in on this. She may know which books he's talking about."

They all looked at one another, more determined to find her than ever. However, Red did not reciprocate their enthusiasm. She had zoned out of their conversation and was staring peculiarly at the creek.

"Red, what's wrong?" Jack asked.

"Nothing, I'm fine," Red said, but she never looked up. "But I swear I just saw the creek's current change direction—"

Red let out a high-pitched squeal. She covered her mouth with one hand and pointed down the creek with the other. Two wooden caskets eerily floated in from another part of the Dwarf Forests. Red and the others stared at them in complete silence until the caskets gradually washed ashore nearby.

"What are those doing in the creek?" Trix asked. She and her fairy

friends had never seen such a macabre sight.

“They don’t call it Dead Man’s Creek for nothing,” Jack said.

“You don’t think there are *bodies* inside, do you?” Red peeped.

Goldilocks withdrew her sword. “Only one way to find out.”

Without any hesitation, Goldilocks approached the caskets and sliced off the latches. She opened them and then had to cover her mouth from the smell.

“Yup, there are bodies inside, all right,” she said. “Come take a look! I’ve never seen corpses like these before.”

“No, thank you!” Red was quick to say. “I’ll take your word for it!”

Conner and Jack went to have a look for themselves. Each casket contained the body of an elderly person. They were so pale and wrinkled, they looked like white raisins. They were also so shriveled, their gender couldn’t be identified. It was as if the bodies had been completely drained of life.

The fairies hovered over Jack’s shoulders, too scared to look, but too curious not to.

“Oh, no!” Merkle cried. “This is an omen! It’s an omen, I tell you!”

It was so ghoulish, Conner thought the paranoid fairy might be right. “Yeah,” he said. “But an omen of what?”

Chapter Seven

ANSWERS IN THE ATTIC

As soon as Bree finished her Biology homework, Mrs. Campbell sent her up the narrow pull-down stairs to organize the attic. It didn't necessarily need organizing, but there were only so many times Bree could clean the kitchen or mow the lawn. And since Bree was still grounded, her mom was forced to get creative with the tasks she assigned, and the Campbell house had never looked better because of it.

The attic was dark and dusty. Besides a little light cleaning, there wasn't much Bree could do. So, she figured she would just move boxes from one end of the attic to the other until her mom called her down for dinner.

At first she tried arranging all the storage by season, but that stopped when she couldn't decide which season the box of baby clothes belonged in. She then started organizing items by color until she found the box of Christmas lights and quickly lost interest in the amount of work that would take. The themes to her organization changed repeatedly, until she ended up just stacking boxes in the shapes of famous structures.

Bree had been so taunted by questions and theories lately, she actually enjoyed the mindless activity. She never expected to find something in the attic that would make those questions more daunting.

She stacked a pile of boxes too high and it toppled over, spilling all the contents on the floor. One of the items was a small treasure chest Bree had never seen. She could tell it was old from the faded floral design painted over the wood.

She blew off a layer of dust covering the chest and discovered the name *Anneliese* carved into the lid.

"Anneliese?" Bree said as she inspected it. "Oh, this must have belonged to Grandma!"

She was Bree's German grandmother, and since Bree had been

questioning her heritage a lot recently, she wondered if she could find any information among her grandmother's things.

She opened the chest and a strong perfumed scent filled the attic. The chest was full of letters, photos, and newspaper clippings her grandmother had saved over the years. One of the clippings caught Bree's eye. It had yellowed with age and was very stiff to the touch. It announced Anneliese's engagement to Stephen Campbell, Bree's grandfather.

Directly under the clipping was a letter addressed to her grandmother, and Bree's heart stopped when she read the return address.

Cornelia Grimm
1729 Mystic Lane
Willow Grove, CT

"Grimm?" Bree said, and opened the letter as fast as she could. This was *exactly* what she was looking for.

A black-and-white photograph fell out of the envelope. It was of two young women posing on the front steps of a very large house. The one on the right was Bree's grandmother, so she assumed the woman on the left was Cornelia.

Cornelia looked a few years younger than Bree's grandmother. She had long blonde hair all the way down to her waist and the same smile as Anneliese. Bree figured the two must have been related. She carefully unfolded the letter and read it.

Dearest Cousin Anneliese,

I recently found this photo of you and me when I was cleaning out my desk. I want you to have it. It was taken the day you came to live with us at the house. Can you believe that was almost five years ago? Seems like only yesterday we picked you up from the harbor.

We hope married life is treating you well! Tears come to my eyes every time I remember your beautiful wedding. Stephen is a wonderful man. Are there any children for you two on the horizon? We certainly hope so!

The house isn't the same without you, but we're getting by. The Sisters and I continue the family work and have so many amazing things to tell you next time we meet.

We know this isn’t what you intended would happen when you moved to the United States, but we are so happy you’ve found such a wonderful life.

We miss you and think about you often.

Love, Cornelia and the Sisters

Bree put the letter down and stared at the floor, a little bit in shock. Grimm wasn’t a common last name, so if Cornelia was her grandmother’s cousin, then it was very possible her theory about being related to Wilhelm Grimm was true! The letter practically proved it!

She searched the chest for more correspondences between her grandmother and Cornelia, but they must have lost touch over the years, because she didn’t find anything. But it didn’t matter; this small piece of information made Bree feel like a thousand fireworks had been ignited inside of her.

Bree whipped out her cellphone from her pocket, eager to tell Emmerich. She didn’t care how late it was in Bavaria; she had to share this information with someone else before she combusted.

“Bree, dinner is almost ready,” Mrs. Campbell said as she climbed into the attic. “Well, it certainly looks *different* in here.”

“I had some difficulty organizing it,” Bree said. “I can finish it after dinner.”

“No, honey, you don’t have to,” Mrs. Campbell said. “Your dad and I were just talking, and we’ve decided you’re off the hook. You’re not grounded anymore.”

“Really?” Bree asked. She was very surprised at the exciting turn her afternoon had taken. “Why?”

“Because your little sister cut off her classmate’s ponytail today at school,” Mrs. Campbell said. “You’ve done such a great job with all the chores, we have no way of punishing *her*. And also, we think you’ve learned your lesson.”

Bree nodded. “Definitely have,” she said eagerly.

Mrs. Campbell tried to stop herself from saying what she said next, but it boiled up so much inside of her that she had no choice. “Why did you have to do something so stupid, Bree? I love all you girls equally, but

you’re my *smart daughter*. What were you thinking running around Europe?”

“I told you, Mom,” Bree said. “I just wanted to have a little fun. And if it’s any consolation, I just read about this study that says severe jet lag alters a person’s judgment. So that might have had something to do with it.”

“Well, whatever it was, don’t ever do it again,” Mrs. Campbell said. She noticed the chest and letter in Bree’s hand. “What did you find there?”

“I found some of Grandma Anneliese’s old letters,” Bree said. “This one is from someone named Cornelia Grimm. Does that name sound familiar?”

Mrs. Campbell thought about it. “Oh, I think that was one of the ladies from your grandma’s old *coven*.” She laughed.

Bree was certain she misheard her. “*Coven?*” she said with a gulp. “Did you just say *coven*—as in a house of witches?”

“At least that’s how your dad and his brothers joke about it,” Mrs. Campbell said.

“Wait—are you telling me Grandma was a *witch*?” Bree asked.

It was starting to concern Mrs. Campbell how seriously her daughter was taking this.

“Sweetheart, witches don’t exist,” she said. “When your grandmother came to this country she moved into a big house somewhere in Connecticut with a bunch of distant relatives. Apparently they used to do a bunch of kooky things together—probably just European stuff. Your grandma was very secretive about her life before she met your grandfather.”

Hearing this made Bree’s mouth fall open.

“Well, maybe one of us should go there and figure it out,” Bree said. “It doesn’t matter how distantly we’re related—if we have family up there it would be nice to meet them.”

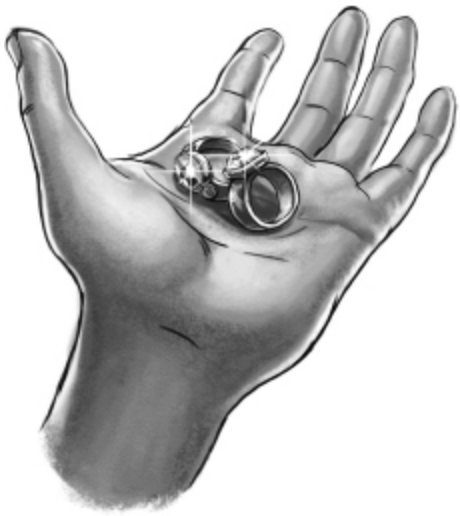
Mrs. Campbell stared at her daughter as if she were coming down with an illness.

“Sweetheart, no one is going to Connecticut. Those women probably aren’t even alive anymore. You’ve been grounded too long. I want you to make as many plans with friends as possible for the next couple weeks, okay? I think it’ll be good for you.”

Mrs. Campbell returned downstairs, unaware of the state she was leaving her daughter in. Bree had so many thoughts at once, she had forgotten how to move. She sat in silence as her body caught up with her

racing mind.

She definitely had plans to make, but none of them had anything to do with friends. Bree had to find a way to *Connecticut*.…



Chapter Eight

THE ONLY OBJECTION

The day of Red and Froggy's wedding finally arrived and the newly christened Center Kingdom was in a daze of celebration. Despite the constant setbacks, Red managed to finish all the planning her perfect day required. And thanks to a great amount of self-control on Goldilocks's part, Red had lived to see it.

The former Hall of Progress had been transformed into a beautiful altar. Five hundred chairs had been set to face a pulpit on top of a large platform. Risers were built for a two-hundred-piece symphony. A massive organ with pipes stretching into the high ceiling had been carefully constructed. Tall vases of pink, red, and white carnations were arranged and placed throughout the hall. White pillars and rosy silk drapes lined the walls.

Goldilocks had spent the entire morning helping the castle servants put everything together and was very proud of their work. However, when Red arrived to make her final inspections, Goldilocks discovered that her true task as matron of honor wasn't just helping the bride, but protecting everyone *from* the bride.

Red stormed into the Hall of Progress wearing nothing but a pink bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. She had curlers in her hair and no makeup on. Her eyes were much larger than usual and a scowl was frozen on her face—she had never looked so anxious.

"This is WRONG, it's all WRONG!" Red yelled. "The chairs are too close together—the women's dresses will get caught! The pulpit is too far away—I'm getting married, not making a pilgrimage! Tell all the musicians they are not allowed to eat any of the food—the caterers only had time to prepare enough for the guests! The pillars and drapes need to match—this place looks like a giant rib cage!"

Red didn't even look at anything long enough to properly see it. She

flung her arms around, yelling and pointing at anything she could.

"Red, this is exactly as you planned it," Goldilocks said. "You need to calm down."

"Please tell me *that's* not what you're wearing to the wedding," Red hollered, targeting Goldilocks next.

"No, I'm wearing something much uglier that you chose for me," Goldilocks said. "Remember? The pink dress with the puffy shoulders?"

Red wasn't listening to a word she said. She began pacing and mumbling to herself.

"Did you sleep last night?" Goldilocks asked.

"*Sleep?* How was I supposed to sleep when there's so much to do?" Red asked. "Wait, are you saying I look puffy? *OH GOD, I LOOK PUFFY! The wedding is canceled! Everyone, go home!*"

Goldilocks removed the flowers from the nearest vase and dumped the water over Red's head to cool her off. The bride-to-be screamed.

"Listen to me very carefully," Goldilocks said, and leaned threateningly close to her. "Everything in this building is *exactly* how you wanted it to be. You're just having *pre-wedding jitters*. There is *nothing* you need to fix or adjust. What you *need* to do is go back to the castle and start getting ready and *enjoy* the day, because if I hear one more complaint from you, this *wedding* will turn into your *funeral*! Is that clear?"

Red frowned, her jaw trembled, and she nodded slowly. "Yes." She turned to face the rest of the room. "My apologies, everyone. Well done! As a reward for your efforts, I'd like to invite you all to the reception at the castle following the ceremony—*just don't eat anything!*"

However, Red wasn't the only one feeling pre-wedding jitters. Froggy, Conner, and Jack were dressed up in nice suits and kept one another company in the library of the castle while they waited for the ceremony to start. Froggy stood motionless at the window. He stared out at the kingdom and watched as the citizens lined the streets. They were bubbling with excitement and anticipation, hopeful for a glimpse of the royal wedding.

"It's funny how times change," Froggy said softly. "Four years ago I was living in a hole, afraid that if I showed my face to the world it would hate and fear me. I never thought love was an option for me. Now here I am, the elected king of a kingdom, about to marry one of the most beautiful women in the world—and she's technically the one who proposed."

“If there’s one thing life is good at, it’s surprising you,” Jack said. “And sometimes it surprises you in the best ways.”

Conner was sitting in an armchair, staring at the floor, oblivious to what they were saying. His mind was still fixated on their search for his sister and the Masked Man.

He quickly looked up when the room went quiet. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” Conner asked. He was supposed to be Froggy’s best man, and so far, he was failing at it.

“Just an observation, nothing important,” Froggy said. He gulped and loosened his collar. “Why does everyone rethink their decision to get married on the day of their wedding? I’ve been fine with the idea for months, but only now do I feel like I’m getting cold feet.”

Conner laughed. “But, Froggy, you’re an amphibian. Your feet are always cold!”

Froggy turned to him and smiled. It was a nice way of putting things into perspective.

There was a knock on the door and the third Little Pig poked his head into the library.

“Your Majesty, the former and future queen is almost ready. The ceremony will begin shortly.”

Jack patted Froggy on the back. “This is it. Are you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Froggy said. “Gentlemen, please join me in my last steps as a bachelor.”

They followed him out of the library, but Conner lingered in the doorway. A bad feeling grew in the pit of his stomach and he looked back at the empty library. It felt as if he was forgetting something, but he couldn’t figure out what it was.

He didn’t want to keep the others waiting, so he caught up with them, but the feeling stayed with him. Perhaps he was just having jitters of his own.

Meanwhile, in Red’s chambers, the bride-to-be was taking an impossibly long time to put on her wedding dress. Goldilocks tried fussing with the sleeves of her matron of honor dress as she waited, but there was only so much she could do.

“Hurry up, Red,” Goldilocks instructed. “You don’t want to be late to your own wedding.”

“Perfection can’t be rushed,” Red called out from her changing room.

As if Red were wrestling a giant fabric monster, Goldilocks heard rustling and tussling from the changing room as Red’s handmaiden struggled to get the dress on her. When the handmaiden stepped out of the changing room her face was so flushed, she looked like she had run a marathon.

“What a dress,” the handmaiden said. She was going to have nightmares about it for the rest of her life.

“Come on, Red,” Goldilocks said. “I’m dying to see it.”

The wedding dress was so massive, the front of it emerged from the changing room a few moments before Red followed behind. It was a white mountain of ruffles and lace, lined with red trim and covered in ridiculous red bows. The veil was messy and exploded from the top of Red’s head like a volcano.

Goldilocks was speechless, and not in a good way. Clawdius leaped from his bed and barked at the dress as if it were a wild beast.

“Well, what do you think?” Red asked with a hopeful smile.

“Well, you said you wanted the wedding to be a spectacle, right?” Goldilocks said.

Red marched across her chambers to the mirror and had a look for herself. Judging from her reaction, the dress wasn’t at all what she had expected.

“I look like a blizzard!” Red gasped. *“I don’t understand—it looked so pretty in Granny’s sketch!”*

“You didn’t try it on beforehand?” Goldilocks asked.

“I didn’t have time!” Red said. “I was too busy helping the twins find the Masked Man!”

“Maybe there’s a way to *simplify* it?” Goldilocks suggested.

The handmaiden hooted. “It’s so tightly stitched, it would take hours to alter it. She might be better off walking down the aisle naked.”

Red had a massive panic attack. She walked around in circles and fanned her tears with her hands so her makeup wouldn’t run. As far as she was concerned, the wedding was ruined.

“Maybe I can help?” said a familiar voice.

They all turned to see Alex standing behind them. None of them noticed when she appeared. Clawdius charged forward to pounce on her, his

traditional way of greeting someone he liked, but Alex waved her hand and the wolf froze in midair. Despite being suspended, he still managed to lick the side of her face.

"Alex!" Goldilocks said, and gave her a hug. "You had all of us so worried. Thank God you're all right!"

"Well, I've been better," Alex said.

Red cleared her throat. *"Excuse me!"* she said, redirecting their attention. "Alex, it's nice to see you, but *I'm in the middle of a wedding crisis!* I could use a fairy's touch!"

"I think you need more than that." Goldilocks laughed.

"Can you help me or not?" Red yelled.

Seeing Red in such a frantic state made Alex forget about her own problems, but she was hesitant to help her.

"I don't know if I should," Alex said. "You saw what I did to the Fairy Council. My powers have a mind of their own—there's no telling what I might do to you."

Red had never looked so desperate. "I don't care if you turn me into a big ball of fire and lightning," she said. "Even *that* would look much better than this dress."

"All right." Alex shrugged. "But I'm going to need your help, Red. I can supply the magic, but you'll need to focus. Think of exactly how you want your wedding dress to look—what you want Froggy to see walking down the aisle toward him."

Red nodded and closed her eyes. Alex extended her hands toward her and light began swirling around the hideous dress. Red concentrated as hard as she could, thinking about the dress she had always dreamed of getting married in.

"Oh, my word," Goldilocks gasped, and covered her mouth.

"I've never seen such a gorgeous thing in my life!" the handmaiden said.

Red refaced the mirror to see for herself. She went into shock because of how stunning it was.

The fabric was so soft and fluffy, the dress looked like a cloud. Appropriately, a *hood* had replaced the veil, and it turned into a long train that flowed down Red's back and onto the floor. The whole dress twinkled like a starry sky.

"I think it needs one more thing," Alex said. She snapped her fingers,

and rather than a traditional bouquet, a *basket* of flowers appeared in her hand.

“I look *beautiful*,” Red whispered. For the first time that day, her eyes filled with tears of joy. “Thank you so much for coming, Alex! It means the world to me!”

At first, Alex was planning to avoid Red’s wedding altogether, not wanting to create a scene or cause any more damage. But seeing how happy Red was on her wedding day made Alex ashamed to have even *thought* about missing it.

“I just wish I could see the ceremony,” Alex said. “But I’ll probably cause a major fuss if I step onto the altar—”

“Oh, that shouldn’t be a problem,” Red said. “The organ isn’t real—it’s a little secret room. I had them build it just in case any of my friends were on the run and didn’t want to be seen.”

Alex and Goldilocks shared a quick look. Had they heard her correctly?

“You were *planning* on one of us being on the run?” Goldilocks asked.

“Are you *new*?” Red asked. “One of us is always in trouble or running from something or someone. It’s just a given in our group. So I planned for it.”

Alex and Goldilocks stared at her, amused but bewildered.

“We should get going, Your Former and Future Highness,” the handmaiden said.

Clawdius whined—he was still frozen in the air. Alex waved her hand and he landed on the ground.

“Sorry, Clawdius, you’re staying in the castle until you learn the difference between children and chew toys,” Red said. “It’s a long story, but thank goodness we got there in time.”

Red had one last look at herself in the mirror and headed for the door. The handmaiden helped Red through the doorway, making sure her dress didn’t snag on anything. The dress was hard to walk in, so Goldilocks pulled Alex aside while they let Red get a head start.

“Have you talked to your brother?” Goldilocks asked.

“I don’t want to talk to my brother,” Alex said. She was still upset he hadn’t come to her defense at the Fairy Palace.

“Well, what he has to say might surprise you,” Goldilocks said. “We found out some information about the Masked Man.”

“What did you find?” Alex asked.

“The potion he stole from the Fairy Palace is something your grandmother invented when your father was a boy,” she said. “It turns any written work into a portal to whatever world it describes. Knowing what he told the witches, we think he’s going to use the potion to recruit an army from a collection of books your grandmother used to own.”

“What?” Alex asked. She knew the potion must have been powerful, but she had no idea such a thing was even possible. “What kind of books is he after, then?”

“We were hoping you would know,” she said. “Can you think of anything off the top of your head?”

Alex thought about it as hard as she could, but the only books she remembered her grandmother having were spell books.

“I can’t think of anything,” Alex said. “But regardless of what books he’s after, we won’t be able to stop him unless we know where he is.”

Goldilocks nodded. “We’ll find him much faster if we work together again.”

“I know,” Alex said. “But after what I did to the Fairy Council, I’m afraid to be around you guys. I couldn’t live with myself if I ever lost control and hurt one of you.”

Goldilocks put her hands on Alex’s shoulders and looked directly into her eyes.

“Alex, for the last six months I have been at the mercy of *raging* hormones,” she said. “One minute I’m devastated, then the next I’m obnoxiously happy. I’m either overly sympathetic or vengefully spiteful, but never anywhere between. Yesterday, Jack told me I looked beautiful and I *punched* him.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Alex asked.

“Because I know what it’s like not being in control of your emotions,” Goldilocks clarified. “And if I can get through today without killing Red, I have no doubt that *you* can learn to control yourself, too.”

Alex appreciated Goldilocks’s faith. “I’ll work on it.”

“Yoo-hoo!” Red sang from the hall. *“Come on! It’s showtime!”*

Alex and Goldilocks headed out of Red’s chambers and followed the happy bride down the hallway.

“Are you excited, Red?” Alex asked.

“Honestly,” Red said, “I never thought I could be this happy. Who would have thought marrying a frog would bring me so much joy?”

The wedding guests had all arrived and taken their seats. The musicians played a pleasant song as they waited (except for the organist, who couldn’t figure out why the organ wasn’t working). All they needed was the bride, and the wedding could begin.

Froggy stood on the platform and looked quite anxious. Every second he waited made him more paranoid that Red might have had second thoughts. He was afraid that at any moment Red’s handmaiden would run inside and tell the room the bride had called it off.

All the royal families had come to support Froggy and Red. Froggy’s brothers, King Chance, King Chase, and King Chandelier, gave him thumbs-ups to calm his nerves. His sisters-in-law, Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, blew him kisses.

Queen Rapunzel sat with her long braid piled in her lap, as it had tripped all the guests seated near her. The people sitting behind Empress Elvina were upset because her giant crown made of tree branches blocked their view, but they were too afraid to ask her to remove it.

Red’s granny and the Little Old Woman who managed the Shoe Inn sat on either side of the empress, chatting her ears off.

“I’ve heard that elves aren’t the best tailors,” Granny said. “You should let me come to the Elf Empire and give sewing lessons. I’ve made all of Red’s clothes ever since she was a little girl. Her wedding dress is the best one I’ve ever made! At least I hope it is. I lost my glasses a few weeks ago.”

The Fairy Council was also in attendance, and Conner avoided making eye contact with them as much as possible. Unfortunately, he couldn’t avoid *everyone* he wanted to.

“Weddings are so romantic. Don’t you think, Butterboy?”

Conner’s whole body went tense at the sound of the voice. He looked up and saw Trollbella had chosen the closest possible seat to him.

“It reminds me of the time we almost got married,” Trollbella said. “Remember that, Butterboy? It was the best ten minutes of my life!”

It was a memory Conner had tried repeatedly to forget. “It rings a bell.”

“Of course, we were so young and foolish then. We weren’t mature enough for marriage,” Trollbella said.

“That was only two years ago,” Conner reminded her.

“Feels like yesterday, right?” she said. “I’m so glad we didn’t go through with it. We needed time apart before we made that leap. We needed to live a little and have more experiences in love. Thankfully, I got all of that out of the way with Gator—*may he rest in Troblin heaven.* I’m sure you feel the same way about that *blonde girl*.”

“You mean Bree?” Conner said. “We weren’t *dating*. I haven’t even talked to her in a couple months.”

Even though they hadn’t spoken in a while, Conner would be lying if he said he didn’t think about Bree often. In fact, Bree was the only thing he actually *liked* thinking about these days.

“Funny how the *flames* of love diminish so quickly,” Trollbella said with a deep sigh. “Luckily, I’ve learned the difference between a *flame* and a *fire*. I didn’t know it at the time, but Gator was just a flame. I’m done with *flames*, what I need now is a *fire*.”

She looked up at Conner and batted her big eyes. Conner’s stomach started to turn—he thought they were past all of this.

“Well, I hope you find one,” Conner said, and patted her on the shoulder. “Excuse me.”

Conner walked away from her as quickly as possible and joined Froggy on the platform.

He wished Trollbella had never brought up Bree. If he were honest with himself, he might admit how much he missed her, but he ignored the feeling whenever it arose, afraid it would grow if he gave it any attention.

Conner was glad she wasn’t around—or so he told himself. He had already exposed her to a dangerous expedition around Europe and a two-hundred-year-old army. Wherever she was, she was much better off without him. Danger seemed to follow Conner and affect anyone associated with him.

Knowing that, Conner wondered if he could ever get married himself. Would it be selfish to expose someone he loved to a life as crazy as his? Would someone willingly exchange rings with *him* knowing it was a risk?

Conner abruptly slapped his forehead. “*The rings!*” he whispered to

himself. *“That’s what I forgot!”*

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked.

“I left the rings in the library.”

“Do you want me to retrieve them?”

“No, I know right where I left them,” Conner said. “I’ll be right back. I’m the worst best man ever.”

Conner rushed out of the House of Progress and made a mad dash for the castle. It was hard to run through the village with all the people lining the streets. The crowds began to cheer as Red rode by in a golden carriage.

“Crap!” Conner said. “It’s gonna start!” He ran as fast as he possibly could, determined to get the rings back in time.

The golden carriage arrived at the House of Progress and all the villagers gathered at the front steps. Red and Goldilocks were escorted out of the carriage and the people cheered at their first glimpse of her wedding dress.

Hearing the crowd outside as Red arrived was the cue for the wedding to begin. The third Little Pig was to officiate at the ceremony, so he took his place behind the pulpit. Jack stood on the steps of the platform just below Froggy, a promoted groomsman until Conner came back.

“Where did Conner go?” Froggy asked.

“Bathroom,” Jack said. “He’ll be right back.”

Alex magically appeared in the small room inside the organ and no one was the wiser. She was so grateful that Red had gone to such lengths. As she looked around the room she saw the wedding was filled with people she didn’t want to see—although she didn’t see her brother anywhere.

Goldilocks walked down the aisle and took her place across from Jack. Red appeared in the doorway in all her glory and the room got to their feet. She moved toward the pulpit and the doors were shut behind her. She walked so delicately, it seemed like she was floating down the aisle.

Froggy felt like time stopped once he saw Red. He forgot where he was and how he had gotten there. As far as he was concerned, she was the only thing in existence. He had never seen such a beautiful sight in his life, and his big glossy eyes became even glossier.

Red had to remind herself to breathe as she walked. She couldn’t believe this moment had finally come. The wedding felt absolutely perfect and everything seemed right in the world.

“You may be seated,” the third Little Pig announced when Red reached the pulpit. He gave a little opening speech, making the guests laugh a couple of times. Red and Froggy were lost in each other’s eyes and didn’t hear a word of it.

Jack worried more as the ceremony went on. Conner was still nowhere to be found.

“What’s wrong?” Goldilocks mouthed to him.

“I don’t have the rings,” Jack mouthed back.

“And now it’s time for the rings,” the third Little Pig announced to the crowd.

Goldilocks turned to the organ and pointed to her finger. *“Rings,”* she whispered, hoping Alex would hear her.

To Jack’s relief, two sparkling rings magically appeared in his hand. He gave one to Froggy and the other to Red. They were oblivious to everything but each other and had no clue anything was wrong.

The quick save wasn’t entirely unnoticed. Emerelda eyed the rings suspiciously—she knew Alex must have been close by. She looked around the room, searching for where she might be hiding.

“Get out of here,” Goldilocks whispered at the organ.

Alex wanted to stay for the entire ceremony, but she knew it was best to make a peaceful exit while she still could. She gazed at her friends one final time, and quietly disappeared into thin air.

“With this ring, I thee wed,” Froggy said as he slipped the ring onto Red’s finger.

“With this ring, I thee wed,” Red said, doing the same.

“King Charlie Charming, do you take Red Riding Hood to be your wife and queen for as long as you both shall live?” the third Little Pig asked.

“I do,” Froggy said. He was so emotional, he let a *ribbit* slip.

“Do you, Red Riding Hood, take Charlie Charming as your husband and king for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” Red said. “And even beyond that.”

Their hearts were overflowing with so much joy, they could have flooded the House of Progress. There wasn’t a dry eye in the room. All the observing couples held each other a little tighter.

“Then unless there are any objections, I hereby pronounce you—”

BAAM! The doors burst open with a blinding flash of light. A gust of

wind blew through the hall, knocking over all the vases and pillars. The guests screamed and covered their heads. A horned creature entered the hall and leisurely strolled down the aisle. As it moved closer to the platform, Froggy and Red realized it wasn't an animal, but *a woman*.

"Forgive the intrusion, but *I object*," Morina said with a menacing smile.

The room erupted into a wave of murmuring. No one knew who or what the woman was.

"How dare you!" Froggy said. *"Who are you?"*

"You don't recognize me, Charlie?" Morina said with a playful frown. "After all we've been through together?"

Even though she didn't have horns herself, Red was about to charge the intruder. "Charlie, do you know this woman?" she asked.

Froggy tried to remember who she might be but couldn't recall a time their paths had crossed. "I've never seen her before in my life. *Identify yourself, woman!*"

Morina cackled so loudly, the hall vibrated from the echo. "Why, I'm your *fiancée*," she said. "Your *other* fiancée."

The entire room erupted in booing and hissing. They couldn't believe this woman had the nerve to barge into a wedding and proclaim such a distasteful lie.

Everyone was outraged, except for Froggy. He became stiff as a board and turned pale green. He knew who she was after all, but he never thought he would ever lay eyes on her again.

"Morina…," he said. *"You've changed.…"*

The witch was delighted to see how affected he was by her transformation. "It's been a very long time. Yet you're exactly how I left you."

Red grabbed Froggy's hand, fearing the worst. "Charlie, what is she talking about?"

Froggy was trembling, as if he were seeing a ghost. "It's been years since I saw her," he said. "She was my first love, but I was afraid of what my family would think if they found out I was courting a witch, so I ended it. She was convinced I ended it because of how she looked at the time, even though I swore it had nothing to do with her appearance. She cursed me to look like a frog so it was my *own* face I would be ashamed to show them."

Red felt as if she was going to be sick. The Charming Kings all stood at once.

"Guards!" King Chance yelled. *"Seize this woman! She is a criminal!"*

"Oh, sit down!" Morina said, and with a flick of her finger each of the Charmings were compelled to sit against their will. "You don't have proof I was the witch who did this to him. Although it does *sound* like me."

"Why are you here, Morina?" Froggy asked. "What do you want?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she said. "I've decided I want you back. I've missed you so much over these years. Why else would I so rudely interrupt your wedding?"

"Over my dead body!" Red screamed, putting herself between Morina and Froggy.

The witch rolled her eyes at the affectionate gesture. "That can easily be arranged," she said. "You have two options, Charlie. Come with me now, and return to the life we started so long ago. *Or* choose to stay and watch me curse your bride with a fate far worse than yours. The choice is yours."

The Fairy Council leaped to their feet at the threat.

"If you even *attempt* to curse anyone, we will personally escort you to Pinocchio Prison," Emerelda said.

"Relax, I haven't done anything illegal yet," Morina said. "It's entirely up to Charlie. So what will it be?"

The hall waited with bated breath, but Froggy didn't know what to do or say. The witch had a paralyzing effect on him.

"Fine," he said with a quivering jaw. "I'll go."

The room gasped. Morina laughed and clapped her hands.

"What?" Red yelled. "Charlie, you can't be serious! I'm not letting you go!"

"I have to go, darling," he said. "I won't let her harm you."

Red put her hands on his face and tears spilled down her own. "Let her curse me, I don't care," she said. "There's isn't a curse in the world that would be worse than living without you!"

"Red, she's much more powerful than she seems," he said. "This is the only way I can protect you."

"She's livestock with lipstick! I can handle it!" Red cried. *"I won't let her take you from me!"*

"I'm so sorry, my love," he said with tears of his own. "I have to go.… I

have to.…”

Red grabbed hold of him with all her might. Froggy kissed her forehead and forced her off of him and joined Morina in the aisle. The witch linked arms with him and they headed to the door together.

Tears were flowing out of Red’s eyes like a fountain. “Emerelda, do something!” Red said. “You can’t let her do this!”

“She hasn’t done anything,” Emerelda said. “He’s leaving of his own free will.”

“THEN, SOMEONE DO SOMETHING!” Red hysterically cried. “PLEASE, I’M BEGGING! SOMEONE STOP HIM!”

Everyone in the hall looked at one another desperately, but there was nothing to be done. When no one came to her rescue, Red ran after Froggy, but she tripped on her dress and fell to the floor.

“CHARLIE, WAIT! COME BACK!” she pleaded. “PLEASE COME BACK!”

Red crawled down the aisle as she cried for him, but Froggy never looked back. He and Morina reached the door and disappeared into a puff of dark smoke.

Red lay on the floor and sobbed hysterically. Goldilocks ran to her and kneeled beside her. Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Granny joined Goldilocks on the floor, but Red was beyond comforting.

The Charming Brothers stood over her by their wives.

“We’ll find him, Red,” Chase said.

“We won’t let this witch take our brother from us again,” Chandler said.

“But she didn’t take him this time…,” Red cried. *“He left me.… He left me at our wedding.… ”*

Red was so devastated, she became delirious.

“Is this a dream, Goldie?” Red asked. *“Please tell me this is a dream. …”*

Goldilocks had no words to comfort her. Red rested her head on Goldilocks’s lap and sobbed herself to sleep. With nothing left to see and no way to help, the Fairy Council disappeared one at a time. The other guests took their lead and filed out of the Hall of Progress.

“What ever happened to Butterboy?” Trollbella said as she walked out with the others.

Jack looked around the hall, but there was still no sign of him. “I’m

going to find Conner," he said to Goldilocks. "Something must have happened to him."

He left the Hall of Progress as fast as he could. The eager crowds outside weren't aware of what had occurred and they cheered every time someone walked out, expecting their newly married king and queen to emerge at any moment.

Jack squeezed through the villagers and retraced what he assumed would have been Conner's path to retrieve the rings. He made it all the way back to the castle with no sign of him. However, as soon as Jack stepped into the library, he discovered his instincts were right.

All the furniture had been knocked over and the paintings were crooked. The windows were shattered and most of the shelves were broken. The floor was covered in books and glass.

"Conner!" Jack yelled.

He heard grunting and found Conner curled up in the corner. He had a black eye and a busted lip, and he was clutching his stomach. Jack gently lifted him up to a seated position.

"Conner, what the hell happened?" Jack asked. "Who did this to you?"

He was still shaken up and had a hard time speaking. "He was here…," he said.

"Who was?" Jack asked.

"The Masked Man," Conner said. "When I came back for the rings… he was in the library… he was stealing books… I tried to hold him down… but he fought me off.…"

Conner raised his arm and showed Jack a sack he was clutching tightly in his fist. He had managed to grab hold of the Masked Man's mask.

"I saw his face…," Conner said. "Alex was right all along.… *He's our dad!*"

Chapter Nine

A MOTH OF MEMORIES

Alex stood in a window that was so large, a ship could sail through it. She had chosen to occupy this bedroom at the giant's castle because of this very window and the beautiful view of the stars it had at night. Also, it was the farthest bedroom from Mother Goose's room and the only place you couldn't hear her snoring.

Every night she would stare up at the stars and pretend she was talking to her grandmother. The castle was above the clouds, so Alex had an unobstructed view of the moon and constellations. Wherever her grandmother was, Alex felt much closer to her here.

"You said that fairies don't die and that you'd always be with us," Alex said. "So if that's the case, please send me a sign to show you're there. Please send me something that lets me know I'm not really as alone as I feel."

It was a request Alex asked of her grandmother every night, and every night she waited for a response. Eventually she became too tired to stand and would crawl into the giants' football field–sized bed and try to sleep. However, tonight Alex never became tired, and the longer she waited for a response, the angrier she became.

"The whole world thinks I've lost my mind, Grandma," she told the sky. "And I can't blame them—I've lost control of my powers and I'm obsessed with finding a man I think is my dad. It would be much easier if I believed I was crazy, too, so why can't I? Why am I so certain of what I saw? I'm begging you, please send me something to give me some clarity—I hate feeling this way."

Luckily for Alex, someone *was* listening tonight. Just when she was about to give up and go to bed, something among the stars caught her attention. It was bright and grew bigger and bigger the longer she watched

it.

Alex would have assumed it was a plane if she were in the Otherworld, but she had no clue what was headed her way. Soon, Alex saw the object had wings, not like a bird or a fairy but like an insect. It was a giant moth, proportionately sized in scale of the giants' castle, and it was made entirely of white light.

The moth landed on the windowsill beside Alex. She had no reason to trust the moth, but for whatever reason, she knew it wasn't going to harm her.

"Where are you from?" Alex asked.

The moth looked up to the stars.

"Did my grandmother send you?" she asked.

The moth wiggled its feathered antennae, and Alex took that as a yes.

"Why did she send you?"

The moth lowered its wings and made them flat against the windowsill. Even though it never said a word, Alex knew exactly what it meant.

"You want me to climb on your back?" Alex said.

The moth stayed put—so she took it as a yes. Alex wasn't sure if it was even possible, but when she stroked the moth's wing, she found it was as solid as a real moth despite being made of light. Alex climbed onto its back and the moth fluttered into the night sky, leaving the giant's castle behind.

The moth glided through the cool night air and down into the clouds. Alex could see the entire fairy-tale world once they flew beneath them.

"Where are we going?" Alex asked, but the moth never gave any indication.

Everything was dark, but judging from the terrain she could see, Alex figured the moth was descending somewhere between the Fairy Kingdom and the Charming Kingdom. They landed in the middle of a forest. There was a dry riverbed and a few tree stumps but nothing very special about this part of the woods.

"Why did you bring me here?" Alex asked as she climbed down from the moth's back.

The moth suddenly separated into a dozen orbs that then dispersed throughout the woods. A few of the orbs flew to the tree stumps and morphed into the rest of the missing trees. Some of the orbs turned into water and flowed down the empty riverbed. It was like they had turned into

holograms to show what the forest had once looked like.

The remaining two orbs flew farthest into the forest and became the silhouettes of a woman and a young boy. They walked hand in hand to where Alex was standing. The boy reminded her so much of Conner when he was younger, and the woman looked like a younger version of her grandmother.

“Oh my gosh,” Alex said as she glanced around the forest. “This is a *memory*. That’s Grandma and Dad!”

Her dad and grandmother were in the middle of a conversation as they walked. Their voices sounded overexposed, like an old recording was playing.

“Why are you taking me into the woods, Mother?” the boy asked. “You know I hate the outdoors.”

“Because fresh air is good for you,” the Fairy Godmother said.

“I don’t see how that’s possible with all the bugs,” the boy said. “I wish you let me stay in my room.”

He was a very spiteful and unhappy child—nothing like Alex had imagined. The twins were told their entire lives how energetic and adventurous their dad was as a boy. But the child Alex was watching now couldn’t be more different than that. Was the memory she was witnessing of a rough time?

“I wanted to show you something I found the other day when I took a walk,” the Fairy Godmother said. She put her hands on his shoulders and moved him in front of a tree. “Do you see that big hole in the tree? There’s a squirrel’s nest inside there.”

“Fascinating,” the boy said, and rolled his eyes. “Can we go home now?”

“Not yet—I want you to see it,” his mother insisted. “The last time I was here a mother squirrel had just given birth to babies. One of the babies had very sharp claws and was scratching itself and all its siblings, so the mother chewed its claws off.”

“Why would she do something so barbaric?” he asked.

“Because she was trying to protect it and the other babies from getting hurt,” she said. “It may make it more difficult for the squirrel to climb trees and defend itself later in life, but the mother did what she knew she had to. All mothers have to make tough decisions regarding their children; it’s just

part of nature. Why don’t you peek in and see how much they’ve grown?”

The Fairy Godmother gave him a little push toward the tree. The boy reluctantly looked inside.

“It’s empty, Mother, I don’t see anything,” he said. “Perhaps an owl attacked the nest and ate all the babies during the night. Now *that* is something I wish I could have seen.”

The boy turned back around and saw his mother pointing her wand at him. *POW!* Ropes blasted out of the tip of her wand and wrapped her son around the tree. He screamed and struggled against them, but he was confined.

“Mother, what’s the meaning of this?” the boy yelled. *“Let me go!”*

“I’m so sorry, my darling,” the Fairy Godmother said tearfully. “This is the hardest thing I will ever do, but I have no choice.”

“What are you talking about?” the boy said. *“What are you doing to me?”*

“I know what you dream of when you’re asleep,” the Fairy Godmother said. “I know your heart’s greatest desire is to grow up and take over the world, but I can’t let you use your magic to hurt or kill anyone. So, I have to *chew your claws off*. I have to kill your magic.”

“No, Mother!” the boy screamed. *“Don’t do this! Please!”*

The Fairy Godmother pointed her wand at him again and hit her son with a bright blast of light. A few moments later, a sparkling silhouette his exact shape and size fell out of him. The Fairy Godmother waved her wand and chains wrapped around the silhouette. She dragged it into the river and held it under the water.

The silhouette squirmed and convulsed as the Fairy Godmother drowned it, splashing water everywhere. The task was more difficult to perform than the Fairy Godmother had expected, and she closed her eyes. Little by little, the silhouette faded in the water until it washed away completely.

Both the Fairy Godmother and her son were crying, but for very different reasons. Alex was choked up, too—it was one of the saddest things she’d ever witnessed. This couldn’t be a real memory—this must have been someone’s nightmare. But why was her grandmother showing it to her?

“One day you’ll forgive me,” the Fairy Godmother said, and climbed out of the river.

“I will never forgive you!” her son cried. *“I will hate you until you die!”*

He stared up at her with so much hatred, he was obviously telling her the truth. He would never love her again.

“That’s your decision,” she said. “But even if you do, I will never stop loving you, Lloyd.”

Alex felt like she had been punched in the stomach. *“Lloyd?”* she said.

“You never would have done this to John…,” Lloyd cried. “You’ll always love him more… always…”

The trees, the river, the Fairy Godmother, her son, and everything the orbs projected vanished, leaving Alex alone in the forest. It was so still and quiet, Alex could hear her heart beating. Her grandmother’s spirit supplied her with more clarity than she could have asked for.

“So that *was* a memory,” she said. “Dad had a *brother!*”

Chapter Ten

MAKING AMENDS

The following morning, Alex was still in the forest the moth had taken her to. She sat on a tree stump and stared at the dry riverbed across from her. The events that had taken place here a few decades before constantly replayed in her mind. She was so fixated on them, she hadn't even noticed the sun had risen.

For months she had tortured herself with theories to validate what she saw in the Fairy Palace. She spent hours of each day trying to understand how her wonderful father had become such a monster and been in two places at once. And although it didn't bring her any joy to learn the truth, it was the best answer she could have hoped for: It wasn't her father, but she hadn't hallucinated, either.

Alex and Conner had an uncle—an *uncle Lloyd*, to be exact. And based on the little she knew about him, Alex couldn't blame her dad and grandma for keeping him a secret.

She was very eager to tell her brother what she had discovered. Now that she had confirmed her sanity was intact, it was much easier to forgive her brother for not believing her. Perhaps she had expected too much of him. Had the roles been reversed and Conner claimed *he* saw their deceased father come back from the dead, she probably would have treated him exactly as he had treated her.

Alex was looking forward to regrouping with her friends. Goldilocks was right; they worked much better together. And now that she had the answers she had been looking for, she wasn't nearly as worried about her emotions getting the best of her.

A stomping sound came from somewhere behind her in the woods. She turned and saw a chubby unicorn with a broken horn in the distance.

"Cornelius?" Alex said. "Is that you?"

She was certain it was her old steed—how many misfit unicorns could there be in the world? Cornelius bucked excitedly when he saw her, but then ran in the opposite direction.

“Well, that was strange,” Alex said.

A few minutes later, Cornelius came racing back, galloping faster than any horse. The unicorn wasn’t alone. A very handsome young man with wispy hair was riding on Cornelius’s back.

“Rook?” Alex said. “What are you doing with Cornelius?”

He was the last person she expected to bump into in the woods, but Rook was overjoyed to find her.

“Alex!” he said. “Cornelius and I have been looking *everywhere* for you!”

She knew why the rest of the world was searching for her, but Rook’s motives were a mystery. “What for?”

“It’s a long story—but we’ve been following the Masked Man!” he told her. “We know where he’s been hiding!”

Alex’s heart began to race—she prayed he wasn’t mistaken. “But we’ve been looking for months! How did you find him?”

“Cornelius and I have been trailing him,” Rook explained. “We figured it wouldn’t hurt to have two more men on the job. We weren’t going to bother you unless we found something worth bringing up—but a few days ago we saw him running through the Dwarf Forests! We followed him and found a *cave* he’s been living in!”

“Rook, that’s amazing!” Alex said. “Where is the cave?”

“Northwest, between the Elf Empire and the Northern Kingdom,” he said. He retrieved a folded paper stuck in his boot and handed it to her. “Here, this map has his exact whereabouts.”

Alex looked it over—Rook had circled the exact spot in the Northern Mountains where the cave was located.

“There’s something else you should know,” Rook said, and his tone became much more serious. “We checked on the cave yesterday to make sure he hadn’t moved. His mask was gone, but he had a large bag of books with him. One by one he took a book out, laid it open on the ground, and poured this strange liquid on it from a blue bottle. It made the books glow *and then he disappeared inside them*.”

“What kind of books did he do this to?” Alex asked anxiously. He must

have found the collection he was after.

Rook closed one eye as he remembered. “They were really specific titles—I had never heard of them before,” he said. “The first one was called *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. He spent a couple hours inside that one, then returned from it soaking wet. A giant tentacle came out after him and tried to pull him back inside, but he managed to shut the cover and it went away. The second book was called *The Jungle Book*, and he was inside that one for only a few minutes before he crawled out of it with scratches all over his body.”

Alex covered her mouth. She never expected the Masked Man was after literature from the *Otherworld*. No wonder he had such a hard time locating the collection.

“The third book was about a wonderful warlock of some kind,” Rook said. “He was from a place with two letters—I think it started with an *O*.”

“You mean Oz?” Alex asked. “He went inside *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*?!”

“Yes! That’s the one!”

“And how long did he stay inside?”

“He’s still in there as far as I know,” Rook said. “He traveled into it a few hours before sunrise. He took the whole bag of books with him. Cornelius and I have been searching for you all morning—we didn’t want to do anything until we found you. It’s a miracle we did!”

Alex was so enthralled that she was shaking. “I’ve got to find my brother. Thank you so much, Rook!”

She gave Rook a huge hug and kissed him on his cheek—but as soon as she did, she regretted it. She pulled away from him and he blushed. It was an insensitive thing to do, given their history.

“You could have been killed,” she said. “Why would you risk going after him?”

Rook was shy about telling her, but he forced himself to. “I’m just trying to make amends for hurting you. I’ll never stop caring about you, Alex.”

Alex appreciated it, but it didn’t change how she felt about him. During the war with the Grande Armée, Rook knowingly put the world at risk to save his loved ones. She understood that he had been thrown into a terrible situation and just did what he thought was right, but it was still difficult to forgive him.

Unfortunately, Alex's world was filled with terrible situations and difficult decisions, and she had to trust anyone who came close to her unconditionally. And just like her brother had feared, she didn't think she would ever find someone she was comfortable enough to share that burden with.

"Well, don't waste any more time on my account," Rook said. "Go find your brother."

Alex gave Cornelius a hug and left the forest. She headed for the Center Kingdom, hoping her brother and their friends were still there.

Conner was lying in bed in a guestroom of the Center Kingdom castle. Hagetta sat by his side, setting his injuries ablaze with the flames of her magical healing fire. Goldilocks and Jack stood over the bed, very intrigued by the process.

"Thanks for coming, Hagetta," Conner said. "This sure beats waiting for everything to heal naturally."

"If only it healed wounds of the heart, too," Hagetta said. "How is Red holding up?"

Goldilocks sighed. "She won't eat or come out of her room."

"In good news, the kingdom felt so sorry for Red, she's been reelected queen in Froggy's absence," Jack said.

"I can't believe he left her at the altar," Conner said. "That doesn't sound like the Froggy we know."

"He's overcome the curse but not the spell she cast over him," Hagetta said. "I hate to say it, but he did the right thing. Morina is a very powerful witch and she's infamous for the grudges she keeps. He probably saved Red's life by leaving with her."

She raised a burning stick toward Conner's black eye, but he held up his hand to stop her.

"I kind of want to keep that one," he said. "It makes me look tough."

Hagetta applied the flames anyway and the bruising disappeared within a few seconds. She looked over his injuries one last time and shook her head. "I don't understand what kind of father could do this to his own son."

"You're positive the Masked Man is your father?" Jack asked.

Conner nodded. “I feel so ashamed of myself. I know Alex better than anyone—of course she was telling the truth! She wouldn’t have believed it herself unless she was absolutely sure of what she saw. I should have supported her more. What kind of brother am I?”

There was a bright flash and Alex appeared in the middle of the room. It gave everyone a fright and Conner almost fell out of bed.

“I don’t know when you learned to do that, but I wish you wouldn’t!” he yelled. “Wait—*Alex!* You’re *here!* Thank God, we have so much to tell you!”

Alex was so glad she had caught Conner and their friends together. “And I have so much to tell you! Where are Froggy and Red? Did they go on their honeymoon?”

They exchanged depressed looks and Alex knew something was horribly wrong.

“Conner, you’re *hurt*,” Alex said, noticing the patches of flames covering his body. “What happened?”

Goldilocks broke the bad news to her. “Shortly after you left, a witch named Morina stormed into the wedding and threatened to curse Red unless Froggy left with her.”

“*What?*” Alex said. “But *why*? Who is this witch?”

“She’s the witch who cursed Froggy to look like a frog all those years ago,” Hagetta said. “It must have infuriated her that he found happiness despite his appearance, something she could never achieve.”

“But the Fairy Council was there. Why didn’t any of them stop her?” Alex asked.

“The Charming Kings tried, but he wasn’t being *kidnapped*,” Jack said. “There wasn’t anything anyone could do. He left of his own free will to protect Red.”

Alex couldn’t believe she had missed all of this, but she was glad she’d left the wedding when she did. Had she stayed, she definitely would have lost control of herself and done something she regretted.

“Conner, please tell me you injured yourself trying to fight her off,” she said.

“Oh, just wait, the story gets better,” Conner said sarcastically. “While all this was happening, I came back to the castle because I had forgotten the rings. I caught the Masked Man—*oh yeah, remember him?*—stealing books

from the library! I tried to hold him down, but he attacked me. I yanked his mask off just before he left and I saw his face! You were right, Alex—*it's Dad!* I'm so sorry I never believed you!"

Alex looked from side to side uneasily. "Err… no, I wasn't."

"No, Alex, it's okay!" Conner said. "We all know you're not crazy or confused! We believe you now—I saw him with my own eyes! Dad is alive and he's been wreaking havoc on the fairy-tale world! It's my fault for not trusting you from the beginning—*why are you looking at me like that?*"

She didn't seem nearly as relieved to hear this as he had expected. Instead, Alex just nodded along and impatiently waited for him to stop apologizing.

"First off, thank you for your trust. I appreciate it," she said. "But I was wrong. The Masked Man is not Dad—*it's Dad's brother!* I just found out!"

Conner raised an eyebrow. "Who told you that?"

"Well," she said, not knowing how to describe what she experienced. "Um… a *moth* did."

Conner squinted at her and his mouth fell open. He was expecting a much better answer than that. "A *moth* told you?"

"Yes—but it wasn't a regular moth, it was more like an angel."

"An angel moth?"

"Well, it came from somewhere in the stars. I think Grandma sent it."

"Grandma sent you an angel moth from outer space?"

"Kind of! Anyway, the moth took me to a forest and then turned into a bunch of orbs that re-created a memory—stop looking at me like that, Conner! The point I'm trying to make is that the Masked Man is not our dad!"

The others looked back and forth at the twins like they were watching a tennis match. It was the most absurd conversation they had ever heard.

"Guys," Conner said to them, "I take back everything I said before. I think Alex has lost her mind and I might be next."

"Hold on a second," Alex said, and crossed her arms. "You just said you should have believed me from the beginning! Why don't you believe me now?"

"Because you sound ridiculous," he said.

Alex closed her eyes and made a fist with both hands. "Conner, who cares how I found out! The Masked Man is actually our uncle Lloyd!

Grandma had two sons!”

“IT’S ABOUT TIME YOU FIGURED IT OUT!” shouted a voice that didn’t belong to anyone in the room.

Mother Goose suddenly appeared outside the window, flying on Lester’s back. The gander knocked the window open with his beak and they flew into the room and landed with a loud *thump*.

“Alex is right, Conner,” Mother Goose said as she climbed off Lester’s back. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for you to put the pieces together!”

“You’ve known this entire time?” Alex asked.

“It was your grandmother’s dying wish that I not tell you,” she said. “I swore to her that I would keep it from you. That’s one of the reasons I’ve been keeping such a low profile! I knew if I hung around you kids while you looked for him, what I knew would slip out eventually. Thankfully, the rooster is out of the henhouse now!”

The twins wanted to choke her for keeping information from them *yet again*, but they knew Mother Goose cherished her friendship with their grandmother too much to break her promise to her.

“Does anyone else know about our uncle?” Alex asked. “I mean, the Fairy Council must have known Grandma had two sons.”

“Well, it’s complicated,” Mother Goose said. “When Lloyd was a teenager he ran away from the Fairy Palace and your grandmother told the council he was dead—she even staged a funeral that the council attended. She didn’t see him until years later on the *first* night he broke into the palace to steal the potion. The Fairy Godmother received an anonymous letter that warned her he was coming for it, so she was expecting him. Thanks to the Hall of Dreams, she already knew what he was planning to do with the potion, so she sentenced him to life in Pinocchio Prison. *She* gave him the mask he wears so no one would ever know he was her son.”

The story of the Masked Man was getting more complex as time went on, and there still were so many things they didn’t know.

“Mother Goose, do you know where he’s been hiding?” Jack said.

“I don’t, but Alex does,” Mother Goose said. “Alex’s old *squeeze* found her in the woods and told her he had found the cave Lloyd has been hiding in.”

Everyone jerked their heads toward Alex. They couldn’t believe it had

taken this long for one of them to bring it up.

“Wait, how do you know that?” Alex said.

“I’ve been following you since the moth showed up,” Mother Goose said. “Yes, Conner, there really was a moth—and yes, your grandmother most likely sent it from wherever she is. I wish she had sent a letter instead. Giant insects give me the creeps no matter how angelic they are.”

“Will one of you just tell us where he is already?” Conner yelled.

Alex filled the others in about her encounter with Rook and Cornelius in the woods. She told them everything Rook told her, and what he had witnessed.

“Those are the books I caught him stealing!” Conner said.

“Grandma gave Froggy the books as a thank-you for helping us survive our first trip into this world,” Alex said. “They must have been the collection our uncle was asking the witches to help him find. He must have found them on his own and stole them when everyone in the castle was at the wedding.”

“So the army he’s planning to recruit isn’t from one story,” Conner said.

He gasped as he remembered something he and his sister had seen several months earlier. At the time it seemed meaningless, but now that he knew his uncle’s plans, it was spookily significant.

“Alex, do you remember his cell in Pinocchio Prison?” Conner asked. “He had all those strange carvings on the wall, of monsters, and pirates, and soldiers! Now think about the books he has in his possession. He’s planning to recruit an army of *literary villains!*”

It was an unsettling thought for everyone. The damage the Masked Man could cause if he unleashed an army like that onto the world would be catastrophic. There wouldn’t be a force powerful enough to stop it. All the armies in the fairy-tale world were still recovering from the war with the Grande Armée.

“So what’s the plan?” Jack asked. “How do we stop him?”

“We need to go to the cave,” Alex said. “We’ll wait for him to go into a book, if he’s not inside one already, and destroy it. That should trap him inside it forever, right?”

“According to the rules of your grandmother’s potion journal, it should,” Goldilocks said. “She made it very clear to be protective of the book, as it’s the only way in and out of a story.”

“Great,” Alex said with a sigh of relief. Getting rid of her uncle might be easier than she expected. “Then we should hurry.”

Everyone seemed convinced except for Conner, who shook his head. “Alex, you’re forgetting one thing,” he said.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“We need the Masked Man to clear your name,” he said. “The only way we’ll be able to prove to the Fairy Council that you’ve been right all along is if they see him with their own eyes. They need to admit they were wrong for doubting you and reinstate you as the Fairy Godmother.”

“Conner, I don’t care about being the Fairy Godmother anymore—”

“But I do!” he said. “You were born to lead, protect, and help the people of this world, and you can’t do that if you spend the rest of your life hiding. You and I both know that if this world gets left to the council alone, it’s going to fall apart.”

Alex was very touched by her brother’s words, but she couldn’t ask them all to put themselves in danger for the sake of her reputation. However, as Alex looked around the room, she saw it wasn’t up to her. Everyone was nodding in agreement with Conner.

“He’s right,” Goldilocks said. “We have to capture your uncle and bring him back—even if it means going into the books ourselves.”

“We’re going to go inside the books ourselves?” Mother Goose said, and everyone turned to her at once. “Sorry—that wasn’t an objection. It would be very *adventurous*, even for this group.”

Their support almost moved Alex to tears. In less than a day she had gone from feeling like the loneliest person in the world to the luckiest.

“I’m assuming everyone is in?” Conner asked. He put his hand in the middle of the group and one by one the rest of them joined in. Even Lester joined and stuck the tip of his wing in.

“To the cave!” Jack said.

“And beyond the kingdoms!” Goldilocks added.

There was a soft knock on the bedroom door. It opened and everyone was happy to see Red standing in the doorway. Her eyes were swollen from crying and she held a handkerchief tightly in her hand.

“I couldn’t help overhearing.” Red sniffled. “I’m not positive where you’re planning to go, but I hope you’ll let me come along. I could really use an *adventure*.”

Chapter Eleven

THE CAVE

The twins and their friends left for the cave minutes after forming their plan. Alex didn't trust her powers enough to teleport everyone by magic, so they traveled by horse instead. They galloped northwest at full speed, knowing time was of the essence.

Jack and Goldilocks rode Porridge while the twins steered Oats, who was more than excited for his debut journey. Oats's father, a large stallion named Buckle, had been brought out of the Center Kingdom stables for Hagetta to ride. One minute aboard the infamously rambunctious horse was all it took for Hagetta to cast a calming spell on him.

Mother Goose and Red traveled aboard Lester and flew in circles above the others so they kept the same pace. Mother Goose was self-appointed to navigate and occasionally shouted directions down at the others. She also used the trip as an opportunity to play therapist and tried making Red feel "better" with stories of her own heartbreak.

"I've been left and left others at the altar many times myself," Mother Goose told her. "The day I was supposed to wed King Henry VIII was the day he met Anne Boleyn. Needless to say, I went home alone—but boy did I dodge a bullet!"

"Was this recent?" Red asked her.

The mountains in the northwest weren't very far away from the Center Kingdom and they were expected to reach the cave by midnight. Traveling at a horse's pace really made Alex miss her days with Cornelius, but she was happy he had found a companion in Rook.

To pass the time, Conner told Alex everything he had learned about the Portal Potion from their grandmother's book.

"The potion's ingredients were pretty simple," Conner said. "You just need a branch from the oldest tree in the woods, a feather from the finest

pheasant, and a liquefied lock and key from someone you love. Then you let it simmer under two weeks of moonlight, add a splash of magic to mix it up, *and presto—potion galore!*"

"That's all it takes?" Alex asked. "You'd think the ingredients would be more complex for such a powerful substance. This is kindergarten stuff compared to the Wishing Spell."

"The ingredients are more symbolic than specific," Conner said. "Grandma had to be really imaginative when she was creating it."

"That's the beauty of magic—there's really no science to it," Alex said.

After the sun set, Mother Goose enchanted a swarm of fireflies to illuminate the land as they traveled across it. As predicted, they arrived at the cave just before midnight. Alex was grateful Rook's map had been so detailed; the cave blended into the mountainside so well, they would have never found it on their own.

Lester landed as the others dismounted their horses.

"Porridge," Goldilocks said, "if anyone or anything but us comes out of that cave, I want you, Oats, and Buckle to run into the nearest woods and hide there, understood?"

The cream-colored horse gave her a strong nod. Everyone lingered near the cave's entrance for a moment before stepping inside.

Mother Goose rubbed her hands together. "Well, just like I said to Lewis and Clark, North America ain't gonna explore itself," she said. "Let's get a move on."

She led the others into the cave, pulling a timid Lester along with her. The cave was pitch-black.

"It's so dark and creepy in here," Red said.

"What were you expecting? A chandelier?" Conner said.

"That's actually not a bad idea," Mother Goose said. She whistled and the fireflies flew inside and piled over one another at the top of the cave, forming a large chandelier. "Good thinking, C-Dog."

Now that they had a little light, they could see the cave was very tall but not very wide. A handful of the books stolen from the castle were littered across the ground. They walked around the cave and inspected them, reading the titles they found.

"*Tom Sawyer,*" Jack said.

"*Great Expectations,*" Goldilocks said.

"Hamlet!" Red said excitedly. "Oooo! Can we visit *Hamlet*? It's my favorite Shakyfruit play!"

"I think your week has been tragic enough," Mother Goose reminded her.

Conner picked up an older book with a yellow cover. As soon as he opened it, a bright beam with the power of a searchlight shot out of it. It scared him and he dropped the book, causing a couple of loose pages to slip out.

Conner gulped. "I found *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*," he said.

"Be careful," Alex said. "Every page might count!"

The twins collected the loose pages and carefully stuck them into their pockets. Alex cautiously opened the book with the toe of her shoe and turned to the very first page. Just as before, the bright beam of light shot directly out of the book toward the top of the cave. It was a hundred times brighter than the fireflies.

"I bet our uncle is still in there," Alex said.

"Only one way to find out," Goldilocks said. "Let's take a peek and see."

"One of us should stay behind and keep an eye on the book," Jack said. "If anything happens to it while we're inside, we'll be stuck."

"I'll stay," Hagetta volunteered. "I'll guard it with my life. The rest of you go, and please be careful."

They gathered around the book and stared down at it like parachutists waiting to jump from a plane.

"Here goes nothing," Conner said. He stepped into the beam and vanished from the cave.

Conner found himself in a bright and endless space. There was absolutely nothing to see except for words floating, spinning, and jumping all around him.

"Wow," he said. "I've never seen *this* before."

Alex appeared beside Conner. She was followed by Goldilocks, Red, Jack, and finally Mother Goose, who yanked Lester inside the book behind her. None of them could believe the world of words they had entered.

As if their presence had activated something, the words suddenly vibrated to life and shot in all directions. They dispersed randomly and began forming shapes—stretching and multiplying to perfectly outline

whatever they described.

The twins and their friends watched in amazement as a world was crafted around them. A bleak little house with only four walls and a tiny barn appeared in the distance. Grassy fields stretched into the horizon everywhere they looked. Everything from the land to the sky was dreary and gray.

“Alex, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore,” Conner whispered to his sister. “And by that, I mean we’re actually *in Kansas.*”

Chapter Twelve

THE CYCLONE

Despite their prior experiences of traveling between dimensions, Alex and Conner were absolutely astonished. In a matter of seconds the vast prairies of Kansas had been created around them, and their mouths were as wide-open as their awestruck friends'. Even Lester's jaw dropped at the sight of it all.

"It worked!" Alex said. "Not that I wasn't expecting it to—but I still can't believe it actually worked!"

"It's *remarkable*," Goldilocks agreed.

The only thing that traveled with them from the cave was the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* book itself. It was lying open on the ground and emitting a bright beam of light, exactly as it had done in the cave. Conner stuck his head through the beam and saw Hagetta standing in the cave.

"Well?" Hagetta said.

"It worked!" he said, and gave her a thumbs-up. "Wish us luck."

Conner leaned back into the story and shut the book. The beam disappeared, but reappeared as soon as he opened it. He closed it again and tucked it safely into the back of his belt.

Red looked around the fields as if she had never seen anything so bleak. "So this is the Otherworld?" she asked.

"It's L. Frank Baum's interpretation of it," Alex said. "But technically, yes."

"Well, it's just *lovely*," Red said, but her face told differently. "It reminds me of my kingdom—if all the happiness and color had been drained from it."

The lack of color was quite depressing and it immediately put the group in a somber mood. In fact, *they* were the only colorful things in this world.

They heard barking and a child's laughter coming from inside the

farmhouse. It was nice to know *some* cheerfulness existed in this place. The door of the house opened and an old man with a white beard stepped out onto the front lawn. He stared up at the sky uneasily.

“The sky is awfully gray today, Em,” the man called back to the house. “Grayer than it usually is.”

A frail farmer’s wife walked out of the house and began sweeping the porch.

“Oh, Henry, stop it,” Em said. “The sky looks no different than it did yesterday or the day before that.”

A little girl appeared behind the screen door. She was adorable and wore pigtails and a dainty dress. She held her scruffy little dog in her arms and lovingly stroked his fur.

“No, I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Henry said. “We may have a cyclone on our hands.”

“You’ll worry Dorothy if you keep talking like that. Now, go inside,” Em ordered.

The little girl held her dog a bit tighter and stared up at the sky with the same concern as her uncle—it was too late.

“Who are those sad people?” Red asked the twins. “And what’s a cyclone? Is he talking about a one-eyed man?”

Alex and Conner didn’t respond. This wasn’t the first time they had seen their favorite childhood storybook characters come to life, but it was an enthralling sight nonetheless.

Dorothy spotted them and shrieked with joy.

“Auntie Em! Uncle Henry!” she said. “Look over there! *It’s other people!*”

It must have been a long time since the girl had seen another soul besides her aunt and uncle. She was more excited to see the twins and their friends than they were to see her. Dorothy ran across the field to greet them. Henry and Em were so surprised by the visitors, they didn’t move.

“Hello there!” Dorothy said. “What brings you to our farm?”

“Hi there, Dorothy,” Conner said.

Dorothy gasped. *“How did you know my name?”* she asked with large eyes.

Alex shot Conner a dirty look and he panicked. “Because… because…” He struggled.

A huge smile grew on Dorothy's face. "I know," she said. "You're a *fortune-teller* , aren't you? I knew it from the moment I saw you—*you're a traveling circus!*"

With nothing better to say, everyone just nodded.

"Indeed," Conner said, and instantly broke into an outrageous character. "I am *Master Connermoondo*—psychic extraordinaire. The men, women, and bird behind me are part of the world-renowned Bailey Traveling Circus."

Dorothy excitedly jumped up and down. Toto barked at them; even he seemed overdue for some entertainment. This was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to them.

"Allow me to introduce my friends," Conner said with overdramatic gestures. "Meet *Jack*, the circus strong man; *Goldie*, the sword juggler; *Red*, the uptight mistress of the tight rope. Straight from the wild Madagascar jungles, meet the *Lestersaurus*—and his tamer, *Madam Goose.* And last but not least, my sister, *Alexandra the bearded lady.*"

"What?" Alex said.

"But she doesn't have a beard," Dorothy pointed out.

"She shaved this morning," Conner said.

Alex rolled her eyes—nothing was ever easy when she traveled with her brother.

"We were on our way to Kansas City and stumbled upon your humble abode," Conner said.

"That's putting it nicely," Red said.

"I'm so glad you did!" Dorothy said. "Nothing exciting ever happens around here."

It tickled the twins and they exchanged a smile. They knew more about her than she knew about herself.

"Won't you please stay for supper?" Dorothy asked, then turned to her aunt and uncle. "Can they join us, Auntie Em? Oh please say yes!"

Auntie Em and Uncle Henry looked at each other and shrugged.

"I suppose," Uncle Henry said.

"Hope you like corn," Auntie Em said.

Conner quickly looked back at the others, but none of them objected.

"Supper sounds like a good idea," Mother Goose said. "I'm a little hungry, and if Lester doesn't eat every four hours he gets really crabby.

Don't look at me like that, Lester; I wouldn't say it if it weren't true."

Dorothy escorted her visitors into the farmhouse. The house was so small; it was only one room. It had a stove, a cupboard, two beds, a table, and four chairs, forcing everyone but Conner to eat on the beds and on the floor. True to her word, Auntie Em served corn—*and that was all*.

"Please tell me about all the places you've been to!" Dorothy requested at dinner.

"Well, I have good memories of Baton Rouge and Jefferson City," Mother Goose said. "But if you want to make a few bucks, Texas is where the money is."

The others gave her a strange look. How did she know that?

"What?" Mother Goose said. "You think *this* is the first circus I've been in?"

Uncle Henry and Auntie Em never looked up from their corn, but Dorothy was all eyes and ears. Living on the Kansas farm must have been such a dull life, but the adventures that awaited her would definitely make up for a lifetime of boredom.

"You folks certainly get around," Uncle Henry said.

"Speaking of *getting around*," Jack said, "have any of you noticed an awkward man around these parts?"

"He might go by *Lloyd* or *the Masked Man*," Goldilocks said. "He's a friend of ours from the circus. We're looking for him."

"Can't say we have," Auntie Em said. "Y'all are the only visitors we've had since, well, since as far back as I can remember."

This was disappointing and also confusing to the twins. If there was no sign of their uncle in this story, had he already traveled into another book?

"He must be *somewhere else*," Conner said. It was a loaded statement, but luckily only his sister and friends caught on.

"I wish I was somewhere else," Dorothy said with a sigh. "Sometimes I dream about joining the circus just so I can see the world, but I don't think Toto and I will ever get out of Kansas."

A strong wail of wind came from outside, followed shortly by a high-pitched whistling. The sounds were alarming and Dorothy, Henry, and Em froze solid. The tiny house began to rock as the wind grew stronger and stronger outside.

"It's a cyclone!" Henry yelled, and stood up from the table. "I'll free the

animals!”

He jumped from the table and ran out of the house in a panic. Not knowing any better, Mother Goose, Lester, Red, Goldilocks, and Jack quickly followed him.

“What are you guys doing?” Conner yelled.

“We need to stay inside the house!” Alex called after them. “They have a storm cellar!”

It was too late—their friends were already outside, and they didn’t hear a word Conner and Alex said over the strong winds. Em dove to the center of the room and rolled up the rug, revealing a square door built into the floor.

“Quick, Dorothy! Follow me into the cellar!” Em ordered.

She pulled the door open and climbed into the storm cellar under the house. Toto was frightened and jumped off of Dorothy’s lap and hid under her bed.

“Toto!” she said. “Come here, boy!”

While Dorothy tried to retrieve her dog, Alex and Conner ran outside to retrieve their friends. The sky was so gray, it was almost black. The wind blew from every direction and was so strong, it was almost impossible to stay standing.

The twins found their friends in the barn helping Henry set the farm animals free. The cows and horses ran out of the barn and into the fields, away from the approaching storm.

“You guys! We’ve got to get back into the house!” Conner yelled. “Trust us! This is going to get nasty!”

“The storm cellar is the only guaranteed chance we have to survive this!” Alex said.

They figured the twins knew what they were doing since they knew the story, and so they followed the twins out of the barn and back toward the house but came to a quick halt. They screamed and pointed to the sky. Spiraling down from the black clouds was an enormous tornado.

The tornado touched the ground and headed directly for the small farmhouse. The twins and their friends had to grab one another’s hands to stay on their feet.

“We don’t have time to get to the cellar!” Conner yelled.

Alex screamed. “CONNER! LOOK OVER THERE!” she shouted, and

pointed to a nearby field.

Running as fast as humanly possible against the wind was Alex and Conner's uncle. His stolen bag of books was slung over his shoulder and he was bolting for the farmhouse. Even more shocking was that he hadn't replaced the mask Conner had ripped off in the library, so for a split second the twins thought they were seeing their father.

Lloyd leaped onto the porch and saluted the twins. He had been in Kansas the entire time, just waiting for the storm to break.

The tornado was only a few yards away from the house and Lloyd ran inside. The farmhouse was ripped off its foundation and flew into the air. Like a gigantic cloudy monster, the cyclone swallowed the house and it disappeared into the vortex.

"Dorothy!" Henry shouted, and ran toward the twister.

"Henry! Wait! Stay with us!" Jack yelled after the farmer.

"No, Jack!" Alex said. "Leave him! He'll be okay!"

"How do you know?" Jack said.

"Because I've read the book!" Alex said.

The wind was deafening and only grew louder as the tornado drew closer. At first Conner thought they should all travel back through the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* book and into the cave, but he would have lost it in the powerful winds if they tried.

"Everyone, back into the barn!" Conner yelled. It was their only option of survival now.

The terrified group pulled and pushed one another until they all made it back into the barn. Once they were inside, they slammed the doors shut and grabbed hold of anything they could wrap their arms around. Conner clutched a post with one arm and the book with the other.

The tornado smashed into the barn and tore the roof off. The barn began to sway and creak. It tilted back and forth, leaning farther each time.

"Houston, we have liftoff!" Mother Goose shouted.

The barn spun into the air, flying higher by the second. Their feet dangled in the air. There was no way of telling which way was up or down. The tornado was so powerful, gravity didn't apply.

The barn doors were sucked off their hinges. Red lost her grip and was pulled out of the barn.

"RED!" the twins screamed in unison.

“Lester! Go get her!” Mother Goose ordered.

The goose let go of a stable door he had been clutching with his beak and flew into the storm. The wind blew him in circles around the tornado. Every so often he would see a big ball of red fabric pass him—*it was Red.* Lester spread his wings so the wind blew him faster and he managed to catch a piece of Red’s dress in his mouth.

“LESTER, HELP ME!” Red screamed. “DON’T LET ME DIE IN SUCH AN UGLY PLACE!”

The barn was flying directly at them. Lester pulled Red close to his body and wrapped his wings around her, turning himself into a big feathery ball. He smashed straight through the barn wall, returning to the others.

“Great work, Lester!” Mother Goose shouted.

“I thought being left at the altar would be the worst part of my week!” Red yelled.

The barn flew uncontrollably around in the air as the storm continued. Occasionally the twins could spot the farmhouse bobbing up and down in the center of the tornado, but there was no way they could reach it.

The cyclone sped even faster, flinging the barn in one direction and the farmhouse into another. The world spun so fast outside the barn, no one could make out where they were headed. For the first time bright colors could be seen somewhere in the distance, but they couldn’t tell if it was the ground or the sky.

The barn kept spinning and spinning… falling faster and faster… but they had no idea *what* they were falling into.…

Chapter Thirteen

THE TIN WOODMAN

"Is everybody alive?" Conner asked. A series of grunts, moans, and squawks answered his question. It was a miracle they had all survived.

After what seemed like an eternity of falling, the barn had come to a sudden and harsh stop when it hit the ground. What was left of it imploded on impact, and the twins and their friends struggled to push away the wreckage piled on top of them.

"That was much rougher than I was expecting," Alex said.

"Hold on a second—you were *expecting* that?" Goldilocks said.

They all shot her dirty looks and she smiled guiltily. Alex had completely forgotten her friends weren't as familiar with *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as she and her brother were. They had no idea a *cyclone* was on the menu.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Alex said. "In the story a big tornado picks up Dorothy's house and sends it to the Land of Oz. I probably should have filled you all in on that."

"But if the tornado sent them to Oz, where did it send *us*?" Conner asked.

They helped one another get to their feet and emerged from the collapsed barn. At first they had to shield their eyes—everything was so much brighter than it had been in Kansas. The sky was a vivid blue and they were surrounded by a forest of green trees. Even the dirt was more radiant than before.

"Whoa," Conner said. "Did someone adjust the contrast settings?"

"Where are we?" Jack said.

Alex didn't have to think twice. "You guys, we're in OZ!" she excitedly declared. "We didn't end up in Munchkinland like Dorothy, but the cyclone definitely sent us here, too."

A soft moaning sound suddenly filled the forest.

“Does anyone else hear that?” Red asked.

They looked around the trees, but they didn’t find the source.

“Where is that coming from?” Mother Goose said. “Lester, is that your stomach?”

The goose shook his head. He was just as curious as everyone. The sound continued and appeared to grow more agitated as time went on. Conner gasped and his eyes grew very wide—he knew where it was coming from.

“Oh, no!” he said. “The sound is coming from under the barn! We landed on someone—just like Dorothy does! Quick, we’ve got to help them!”

Conner and the others quickly dug through the pieces of barn. They figured they were getting closer to whoever it was, because the moaning became louder and louder.

“Please don’t die—help is on the way!” Conner shouted into the wreckage. “Glinda, is that you? Oh God, if we killed Glinda I will never forgive myself!”

To Conner’s relief, they didn’t find the beloved Good Witch of the South but uncovered a man instead. He was unusually tall, and very thin. He had a long, pointed noise and wore a pointed cap. As they brushed the debris off of him, they discovered that everything from his clothes to his skin was made of metal.

“Oh my gosh! It’s the Tin Woodman!” Alex said.

“Is he a friend of yours?” Red asked.

“No, he’s one of the main characters in the story,” Conner whispered. “This is a big deal!”

The Tin Woodman was so heavy, it took all of them to pull him up onto his feet. He was as stiff as a statue and frozen in a position with his axe raised. His eyes were very large and darted around at the strange people helping him. He continued to moan, but his mouth was shut tightly.

“What’s wrong with him?” Goldilocks asked. “Is he petrified?”

“No, he’s rusted!” Alex said. “He needs oil.”

“Do think there’s a body shop nearby?” Mother Goose said.

“No, he should have an oilcan around here somewhere,” Alex said.

She looked around the trees and saw a tiny cottage a little ways into the

forest. She ran to it and went inside, returning to her friends a few moments later with an oilcan. She immediately oiled the joints around his prominent jaw and it fell open.

“AAAAAAHHHHH!” The Tin Woodman’s moans turned into screams now that his mouth was open, and they didn’t stop.

Everyone covered their ears and looked to the twins to do something about it.

“Is there a way to turn him off?” Red asked.

“Dude, chill out!” Conner said. “Why are you screaming?!”

“BECAUSE A BARN JUST FELL OUT OF THE SKY AND LANDED ON TOP OF ME!” the Tin Woodman yelled. “I DOUBT YOU’D BE TAKING IT ANY BETTER IF IT HAPPENED TO YOU!”

Goldilocks slammed the Tin Woodman’s mouth shut until he calmed down.

“Are you going to stop screaming now?” she asked, but he didn’t move. “Well? Give us a nod.”

“He can’t nod unless he has oil,” Alex said. She oiled the joints around his neck and the Tin Woodman nodded. Goldilocks pulled his mouth open again.

“That feels so much better,” the Tin Woodman said. He was so relieved, he forgot what he had been screaming at. “Would you be so kind as to oil the rest of me? Please?”

Alex oiled his joints from the neck down. Slowly the Tin Woodman’s body began to relax. His shoulders fell and he dropped his axe to his side.

“Thank you,” he said with a long sigh. “I’ve been holding that thing up for a year!”

“You’ve been stuck like this for a year?” Jack asked.

“Most uncomfortably,” the Tin Woodman said. “I always keep an oilcan close by me in case I start to rust. The one time I left it in my cottage, a huge rainstorm caught me by surprise. I’ve been here ever since.”

“That sounds terrible,” Mother Goose sympathized. “I know the feeling. I was buried alive for *two weeks* once—boy, was I glad to get out of that mess! That’s when I learned to ask questions *before* participating in a religious ritual, no matter how cute the islanders are.”

The Tin Woodman glanced at them all nervously. “Who are you people? Where did you come from?”

Conner pushed his sister forward. “Alex, I’m going to let you take this one since I always seem to say the wrong thing.”

Alex looked into the Tin Woodman’s curious eyes. If the barn was any indication, the truth would be way too shocking for him to comprehend. She needed to come up with a story he could believe but wouldn’t frighten him away if they needed his help.

“We aren’t supposed to tell anyone,” Alex said. “But we’re on a secret mission for *the Wizard*. We were traveling through the air when our barn lost its balloon—something the Wizard put together for us—and we fell into this forest. Luckily we had you to break our fall.”

The Tin Woodman was instantly captivated. His jaw dropped open and he put both hands on top of his head. “You know the Wizard of Oz?” he asked in bewilderment.

“We work for him!” Alex said. “There’s a ruthless criminal on the loose and the Wizard asked us personally to track him down. He’s come to Oz in hopes of recruiting an army! The Wizard wants us to stop him before any innocent people are hurt.”

“Why, that’s terrible!” the Tin Woodman said. “But what kind of army would he be looking to recruit?”

“I was hoping you could tell us,” she said. “We aren’t from around here. Would you happen to know of anyone or anything that might help this criminal overthrow the Wizard?”

The Tin Woodman scratched his head as he thought it over. “There are the guards of the Emerald City, but they would *never* betray the Wizard,” he said. “Wait! I know! He’ll probably team up with the Wicked Witch of the West! Everyone knows she’s wanted to get rid of the Wizard since he came to Oz!”

The twins and their friends gulped in unison. They didn’t have to be familiar with the story to know that the Wicked Witch of the West was one of the most terrifying villains in the history of literature. Naturally, the twins’ uncle had come to Oz to partner with her.

“Well, that’s not *that* bad, right?” Conner said, desperately trying to make light of the situation. “She’s just one witch and a couple of flying monkeys.”

“The flying monkeys aren’t all she has in her control,” the Tin Woodman said. “She has forty great ferocious wolves, a flock of forty

frightening crows, swarms of killer bees, and an army of Winkies."

"Yep, that sounds like something Lloyd would be into," Mother Goose said.

"Wait, what's a Winkie?" Red asked.

"A Winkie is how my parents told Alex and me apart when we were infants," Conner said, and laughed hysterically at his own joke—although no one joined him. "Sorry, not the time."

"The Winkies are the people who live in the western half of Oz," the Tin Woodman explained. "The Wicked Witch of the West enslaved them when she took over the Winkie Country, and now she rules the land mercilessly from her castle."

The news bothered everyone except Alex—she was delighted to hear it.

"Alex, why are you smiling?" Conner asked. "This is *terrible* news for us. We can't compete against that."

"No, this is *great* news for us!" she said. "It doesn't matter *who* or *what* our uncle is after as long as we know where he's headed. We can stop him before he reaches the witch. And if he landed in Munchkinland with Dorothy, and we're in the forest with the Tin Woodman, that means we've got at least a day or two of a head start."

"You're right!" Conner said joyfully. "We'll just hide out close to the witch's castle, then tackle him before he gets inside!"

"But who's going to take us there?" Goldilocks said. "None of us know this land well enough to navigate through it alone."

They all turned to the Tin Woodman at once, thinking the same exact thing. As soon as he caught on, the Tin Woodman put his arms up defensively.

"Don't look at me!" he said. "I'm not going anywhere near that place!"

"Oh, come on!" Red said. "If this man gets to the Wicked Witch before we get to him, thousands of innocent people might die! Have a heart!"

Alex leaned in to whisper in Red's ear. "That's not going to work, Red. Part of the story is that the Tin Woodman doesn't have a heart—"

"What do you mean he doesn't have a heart?" Red said loudly. "That's absolutely ridiculous! Everything has a heart!"

The Tin Woodman quickly grew paranoid. "How did you know I don't have a heart?"

"Because the Wizard told us!" Conner said, thinking fast. "The great and

powerful Wizard knows everything! He told us if we crossed paths with a man made of tin to offer him a heart in exchange for helping us."

"So if I escort you to Winkie Country, the Wizard will give me a heart?" he asked.

"He sure will—"

"Excuse us for one moment," Alex interrupted. Before he could say any more, Alex quickly pulled her brother aside. "Conner, what are you doing? We don't have a heart to give this man!"

"We'll papier-mâché one if we have to!" Conner said. "Even the Wizard gives him a fake one at the end of the story, and he's perfectly happy with it!"

"Good point," she whispered. "As you were."

Conner walked back to the Tin Woodman and offered him a handshake. "One heart in exchange for guidance to the Wicked Witch's castle. Do we have a deal, Mr. Woodman?"

The Tin Woodman was very conflicted. Could he face his biggest fear in return for his greatest wish? He certainly wouldn't get a heart waiting around in the forest.

"Deal," he said, and shook Conner's hand.

"Fantastic," Mother Goose said. "How are we getting there?"

"We'll take the *yellow brick road*, of course," he said matter-of-factly.

A quiet little gasp slipped out of Alex and she grabbed her brother's hand.

"Is it far?" Jack asked.

"It's just beyond the forest," the Tin Woodman said. "We'll take it all the way to the Emerald City and then travel through the Winkie Country to the witch's castle. Everyone, follow me—and someone bring my oilcan."

He led the way, and Mother Goose, Red, Jack, Goldilocks, and Lester followed closely behind him. Alex pulled Conner a few steps back and let the others get a head start.

"Did you hear that, Conner?" Alex said. She had bright eyes and a huge smile. "He's taking us to the yellow brick road! *The yellow brick road!* My inner six-year-old self is flipping out!"

Conner smiled, too. "*There* she is," he said with a happy sigh.

"Where is it? Do you see it already?"

"I'm not talking about the yellow brick road, I'm talking about *you*."

Conner laughed. “It’s nice to see you *excited* about something again. I’ve missed it.”

Chapter Fourteen

TROUBLE ON THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

The Tin Woodman guided his new acquaintances through the Ozian forest and they found the magnificent yellow brick road winding through the heart of the woods. Even against all the effervescent colors in the Land of Oz, the bright and majestic road stood out.

Alex began skipping as soon as her feet touched it—she couldn't help herself. "When in Rome," she told her brother before he could tease her.

As they traveled down the most famous path in literature, the land changed drastically around them. The landscape of Oz was even more diverse than the fairy-tale world. With every turn, the yellow brick road curved into a different terrain. One minute they were in a thick forest, the next a wide-open field. They crossed over streams and rivers, ponds and lakes, farmland and little villages, only to end up in another forest.

Mother Goose found the continuously changing land very entertaining. Even *she* had never been someplace so unpredictable.

"This place is a hoot!" she said. "It's more random than your mood swings, Lester!"

"Squaaa," the large bird replied, as if to say, *"How dare you."*

Jack and Goldilocks kept a watchful eye on everything they passed. They had never been someplace they had such little knowledge about. They wanted to be prepared at all times, but didn't have the slightest clue of what to be prepared for.

Red was more interested in the Tin Woodman than the scenery. No matter how long she studied him, she couldn't figure out how he *worked*. She was half expecting to find an on switch sticking out of his back.

"Have you always been a Woodman?" she asked.

"Oh yes," he answered. "My father was a Woodman before me, and his

father before him."

"Were you all made of tin, or is your family a variety of metals?" Red asked, but then quickly apologized. "Forgive me, I hope that wasn't insensitive. I've never met someone of your… um… *element*."

"No, I'm the only one made of tin," the Tin Woodman said. "But I was a real man once."

"Oh, so it's a curse!" Red said. "I'm very familiar with curses. My fiancé was cursed to look like a frog—or at least he *was* my fiancé once upon a time. I'm not sure what to consider him now."

"It wasn't a curse but the result of a spell," the Tin Woodman said. "I fell in love with a beautiful Munchkin girl who agreed to marry me. But she lived with a mean old woman who didn't want to live alone, so she bribed the Wicked Witch of the East to hurt me. She cast a spell on my axe, causing it to slip out of my hand and cut off my limbs one at a time, eventually severing my head and splitting open my body. A local tinsmith rebuilt me one appendage at a time until I was made entirely of tin."

Red was very disturbed by his ghastly story. "Why on earth didn't you just get a new axe?"

The Tin Woodman went quiet for a moment. "I never thought about it," he said.

"Then whatever happened to the Munchkin girl you were going to marry?" Red asked.

"I don't know," he said. "The body the tinsmith built me was hollow. I never had a heart to miss her with, so I forgot all about her. I suppose she still lives with the mean old woman."

"Trust me, you're better off without a heart," Red said. "I speak from experience. Not having a heart means you'll never have to worry about heartbreak. And believe me, *it's awful*."

"But living without a heart means you cannot *feel* at all," the Tin Woodman said. "It may spare you from grief, or loneliness, or misery, or longing, or fear—but you do not enjoy, or laugh, or excite, or love. And one who cannot love is just an object."

Red scrunched her forehead. "But if you can't *long* for anything, how do you know you want a heart?" she asked. "And if you don't *fear*, then why were you so scared when the barn landed on you?"

The Tin Woodman went quiet again. He didn't have an answer, but Red

was making him think.

Conner cleared his throat. “Excuse us, Mr. Woodman,” he said, and pulled Red aside to where the Tin Woodman couldn’t hear them. “Red! What are you doing? You need to shut up!”

“Why? This man clearly has a heart, he just doesn’t realize it,” she said.

“Obviously!” Conner said. “But he’s not supposed to learn that lesson until the end of the story! If he learns that now, we’re going to lose our guide!”

Red crossed her arms and tried to be silent.

The yellow brick road took the traveling party through a few obstacles, but nothing they couldn’t handle. At one point the road disappeared into a deep ditch, but the Tin Woodman chopped down a tree and they used it as a bridge.

They also came to a stop when there was no bridge to connect them to the yellow brick road on the other side of a wild river. Lester acted as a boat and transported each of them across the water one at a time. He squawked loudly when it was the Tin Woodman’s turn, as it was difficult to stay afloat with the heavy man on his back.

Alex and Mother Goose weren’t using magic on purpose. To the twins’ knowledge, the only people in Oz capable of *real* magic were the witches, and they didn’t want the Tin Woodman thinking they had anything to do with the Wicked Witches of the East or West.

All in all, their journey was rather easy compared to how they’d arrived in Oz. Jack and Goldilocks started to relax little by little, but the effortlessness only worried the twins—it was *too easy.*

“I remember Oz being a lot more dangerous in the book,” Conner told his sister.

“Me too,” Alex said. “I remember there were all kinds of scary plants and animals. Maybe we’re missing them all.”

The twins nodded, but they knew they were never that lucky, and the next few miles of the yellow brick road would prove that.

“What was that?” Goldilocks said, and stopped in her tracks.

“What did you see?” Jack asked.

“It was a big shadow,” she said. “It ran through the trees just to my right __”

Red screamed. “I just saw something, too. There, in the trees to my

left!”

The Tin Woodman gripped his axe with both hands, inspiring Jack and Goldilocks to retrieve their own weapons. Alex and Mother Goose shared a look—they would use magic if they had to.

The shadows moved quickly from tree to tree in the forest around them, but never in the same place twice. Something—or several somethings from the looks of it—was *hunting* them.

“What are they?” Conner asked.

“Kalidahs,” the Tin Woodman said, and anxiously eyed the woods.

“Come again?” Red peeped. “What are Kalidahs?”

Unfortunately her question was answered when a pack of eight monstrous beasts emerged from the trees and surrounded them. They had bodies like bears and heads like tigers. Each was nine feet tall and exposed their ferocious fangs and claws.

“Holy hybrid!” Mother Goose yelled.

The Kalidahs growled at the trembling travelers.

“These guys don’t happen to be herbivores, do they?” Conner asked.

“They are, actually!” the Tin Woodman said.

Conner was shocked. “Well, that’s a relief!”

“Wait—herbivores eat meat, right?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“No, those are *carnivores*!”

“Oh,” the Tin Woodman said. “My mistake. These are *definitely* carnivores.”

The Kalidahs lunged toward them. Jack and the Tin Woodman struck two with their axes. Goldilocks gashed one with her sword and kicked another in the stomach. Mother Goose flicked one on the nose.

“Bad hybrid!” she chastised. “Very bad!”

Their defenses only angered the Kalidahs and they salivated at the mouth. Alex hit the yellow brick road with her fist and tree roots shot out of the ground and wrapped around the monsters’ feet.

“Run!” she yelled.

The twins and their friends ran down the yellow brick road as fast as they could. The roots slowed the Kalidahs down for only a couple seconds and they raced after the travelers on all fours. Alex and Mother Goose stayed in the back of the fleeing group, enchanting the forest as they ran to protect their friends.

Alex waved her hands and the trees bent down, trapping the Kalidahs in their branches. They were too strong to be contained for long, and the savage beasts tore through the branches like they were very tiny sticks.

Mother Goose raised her hands into the air as if she were lifting something heavy and dropped them with gusto, sending a strong wave through the yellow brick road like a rug, knocking the Kalidahs off their feet.

"Yahtzee!" Mother Goose said with a fist pump.

Still, it wasn't enough to scare the beasts away. They avoided the road and ran through the trees on either side of the yellow brick road and were gaining ground. The Tin Woodman, Jack, and Goldilocks slashed their paws as they clawed after the group.

The forest was starting to thin out and the yellow brick road curved into a flowery meadow ahead. The meadow was wide-open—they would have no trees to shield them from the Kalidahs. Alex started to panic; they were too powerful and there were too many of them to fight off.

"Conner, when we get to the meadow, make sure the others keep running," she said. "Get them as far away from me as possible! I'm going to stay behind!"

"But the Kalidahs will kill you!" he said.

"No they won't," Alex said. "I'm getting *overwhelmed*."

Conner was frightened to hear this, but he knew it might be their only chance to make it out of Oz alive. He and the others ran into the meadow, and Alex stayed at the edge of the forest. She turned to face the Kalidahs—they were so close to her, she could see the whites of their eyes and the tips of their fangs.

Alex closed her eyes and tried to think of the most overwhelming thoughts possible. If she could reach the point of losing herself the way she did in the Witches' Brew and the Fairy Palace, she knew she could scare the Kalidahs away.

Fortunately, she didn't have to. All eight of the beasts came to an abrupt stop at the edge of the forest, inches away from her. They whimpered and ran off in the opposite direction. Alex couldn't believe it—she hadn't even done anything yet—*or had she?*

The others saw it, too, and came to a halt in the middle of the meadow.

"What happened?" Conner yelled.

“I have no idea,” Alex said with a laugh. “They just stopped and ran the other way!”

She joined her friends in the meadow, and together they watched in utter confusion as the cowardly creatures retreated into the woods.

“That must have been one dirty look you gave them,” Mother Goose said. “Atta girl!”

They all congratulated Alex with hugs and pats on the back, but she wasn’t sure she deserved it. She was certain it must have been something else.

The Tin Woodman was astonished. “So you and the old woman are capable of *magic*?”

“Who are you calling old, *rusty*?” Mother Goose snapped at him.

“Only a few tricks the Wizard taught us,” Alex said with a guilty laugh.

Thankfully, the Tin Woodman found it highly intriguing, not frightening.

Their escape from the Kalidahs must have taken a toll on them, because everyone looked exhausted. They panted and panted, but none of them could catch their breath. Lester lay on the ground and went right to sleep.

“Look at all these beautiful flowers!” Red said, admiring the scarlet flowers covering the meadow. “They match my dress perfectly.”

Red picked one and placed it in her hair. She gathered more for a small bouquet and suddenly screamed.

“What is it, Red?” Jack asked.

“It’s a skeleton!” she screamed. “Right there, lying under the flowers!”

They all went to inspect it but paused when they felt crunches under their feet. The meadow wasn’t just covered with flowers; it was also littered with skeletons. It was horrifying, but none of them had caught their breath enough to scream—in fact, the longer they stood in the meadow, the more exhausted they became.

“What is this place?” Goldilocks asked breathlessly.

The Tin Woodman didn’t seem nearly as tired as the rest. “Oh, no,” he said with alarmed eyes. “It wasn’t *us* that the Kalidahs were running from; it was the flowers! We’ve entered the field of deadly poppies!”

The twins heard a *thump* behind them, quickly followed by another. One by one their friends dropped to the ground, fainting from the poppies’ poisonous fumes.

“Conner,” Alex panted. “What are we going to—”

She fell into the flowers before she could finish her sentence.

Conner was the last one of his friends standing. He fought the anesthesia for as long as he could, but the poppies were too strong. The scent made him dizzier and more fatigued than he had ever been in his life. He was almost too tired to breathe.

With no lungs in his chest, the Tin Woodman was the only one not affected, and he watched in horror as Conner slowly lost consciousness.

“Get… *help*…,” Conner whispered to him.

Conner collapsed on the ground. His eyes fluttered shut and he fell into a deep, possibly eternal sleep.…

Chapter Fifteen

THE WITCH'S CASTLE

Alex and Conner awoke to the sound of sniffling. They were so groggy, they couldn't tell if they were awake or still dreaming.

"They're dead.… They're dead and it's all my fault," someone cried. "I should have known better than to take them into that poppy field. Now they'll never make it to the witch's castle and I shall never get a heart."

The twins sat up and looked around. They were in a grassy field beside a stream. All their friends were sound asleep on the ground near them. Mother Goose was snoring so loudly, it was a wonder the others could sleep through it.

The Tin Woodman was sitting on a boulder by the stream, crying buckets and buckets of tears into his hands. The twins helped each other to their feet and walked over to him.

"Mr. Woodman, are you all right?" Alex asked.

"No, I'm not all right," the Tin Woodman cried, but never looked up. "I just led the Wizard's associates straight to their doom! They breathed too much of the deadly poppy poison and now they'll never wake up! I'll never get a heart and I will never love, or fear, or laugh, or be sad again!"

Alex and Conner shared a smile.

"Mr. Woodman, you can dry your tears!" Alex said happily. "We're awake!"

"Is that you, Alex?" the Tin Woodman asked, but still didn't look up.

"Yes, it's me," Alex said. "My brother and I are up and I'm sure the others aren't far behind."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" he said. "I thought I had lost you all forever!"

Despite the good news, the Tin Woodman stayed in the same sorrowful position with his hands covering his eyes.

"Dude, are you okay?" Conner asked.

“I’m afraid I’ve cried myself into a rust,” the Tin Woodman said. “Be a friend and fetch my oilcan, will you?”

Conner retrieved the oilcan tied to Lester’s reins and oiled the Tin Woodman’s joints. He was so happy to see the twins were awake, he gave them each a tight squeeze. The others started waking up, too. They yawned and stretched and grew curious once they realized their surroundings had changed.

“What happened to us?” Jack asked.

“The deadly poppies put you to sleep,” the Tin Woodman said. “I carried all of you as far away from the meadow as I could—I was afraid it was too late! But you’re all alive and all is well!”

The Tin Woodman jumped happily, causing a loud *clank* when his metal body hit the ground.

“You carried all of us here by yourself?” Goldilocks asked.

“Oh, certainly not,” the Tin Woodman said. “The field mice helped me.”

Everyone suddenly froze. They hadn’t realized at first, but the ground was covered in thousands of tiny mice that blended into the dirt. Red let out a piercing scream and all the mice scattered into the nearby trees.

“How did you convince a bunch of field mice to help you?” Jack asked.

“As I was dragging the twins out of the meadow first, I came upon the Field Mice Queen,” the Tin Woodman explained. “She was being chased by a wildcat and it almost caught her, but luckily I intervened and sliced off the wildcat’s head before it ate her. As a thank-you, she ordered all her subjects to help me bring you all to safety.”

“Oh,” the twins said in unison. They had forgotten the field mice helped Dorothy and her friends escape the poppies in the original story. Still, it was an odd thing to comprehend.

“You let MICE touch me while I was sleeping?” Red yelled. “Who do I look like? CINDERELLA? That is absolutely disgusting! You should have just left me in the meadow!”

Mother Goose got to her feet and did a couple windmill stretches. Her joints popped like firecrackers. “What a snooze! How long were we out for?”

“Two days,” the Tin Woodman said.

“Oh, no!” Conner shouted.

“That’s terrible!” Alex said, and she started to panic. “That means we’ve

lost our head start on Lloyd! He could already be there by now recruiting the Wicked Witch and her army!"

"Then let's get to the Winkie Country right away!" Goldilocks said.

Without wasting another minute, the Tin Woodman raced to the yellow brick road and the others hurried after him. They sprinted as fast as their bodies would carry them and ran off the remaining drowsiness from their poppy-induced sleep.

"Look! The Emerald City!" The Tin Woodman pointed out. "Winkie Country is just on the other side of it! We're nearly there!"

A bright greenish glow filled the sky above the city in the horizon. A massive gate had been built around the city and was covered in emeralds and jewels that twinkled so brightly in the sun, it was almost blinding. Alex wished with all her heart that she could travel beyond the gates and see the spectacular city for herself, but they didn't have a moment to spare.

Perhaps in the future, she and her brother could return to Oz under more enjoyable circumstances and see the Emerald City. But the longer it took them to get to Winkie Country, the less likely it became.

They traveled past the Ozian capital and journeyed a few miles west. The grassy fields around them became less and less lush until the grass died out completely. All they could see in the distance were rough, rocky hills. They knew immediately when they had entered Winkie Country because the yellow brick road came to a dead end.

"Why is there no road through the Winkie Country?" Goldilocks asked.

"Because no one wishes to go there," the Tin Woodman said matter-of-factly.

"Then how will we find the Wicked Witch if there is no path?" Jack asked.

"Usually the Wicked Witch knows you've entered her country from the moment you step foot on Winkie ground," the Tin Woodman said. "She has one eye, but it is as powerful as a telescope, and she can see many miles away from her castle. We won't have to find her—she'll find us."

They all paused before going any farther, and fearfully looked out at the unfriendly land ahead. No one wanted to take the first step.

"Don't everyone go at once now," Mother Goose said.

"I nominate the Tin Woodman to go first," Red said. "It's his world, after all."

“We can’t lose our guide,” Jack said.

“Then I’ll go first,” Alex said. “But no one is going into the Winkie Country unarmed.”

She snapped her fingers and buckets of water appeared in all their hands and Lester’s beak. Her friends looked down at them curiously.

“What are these for?” Goldilocks asked.

“Spoiler alert,” Conner said. “Water melts the witch.”

Alex tiptoed to the very edge of the yellow brick road. She took a deep breath and stepped onto the dirt of Winkie Country. The entire group suddenly gasped and shielded themselves—but nothing happened. A few moments passed and there still was no sign of the Wicked Witch.

“Perhaps the border receded,” Red said. “Take another step.”

Alex took a second step. Once again, everyone covered themselves, but it was unnecessary. She walked several feet into Winkie Country, but there was no retaliation.

“The witch is a no-show. What’s plan B?” Mother Goose asked.

“I’ve heard you can find the witch’s castle if you just follow the sun as it sets in the west,” the Tin Woodman said.

“Okay, then,” Mother Goose said. “You all heard the man—*onward ho!*”

The twins and their friends traveled straight into Winkie territory together. It was some of the most stressful steps any of them had ever taken. They expected to be attacked at any minute by one of the Wicked Witch’s wolves, or crows, or bees, or flying monkeys, but an assault never came.

They traveled for miles and miles into the west with no sign of *anything*. The dry and uneven land was completely deserted—they didn’t even see a single Winkie. As the sun started to descend, it was easy to predict where it would set and they headed in that direction. Just as the sun disappeared into the horizon, the witch’s castle came into view.

“There it is!” the Tin Woodman called to the others.

The castle was not the dark and intimidating fortress they had expected, but was rather pleasant and traditional. It had towers and flags and sat on top of a cliff overlooking the West Country. Even more surprising, there was nothing to stop them from nearing it.

The twins and their friends inched up a steep path to the castle’s entrance. The drawbridge had already been lowered and they cautiously crossed it and entered the castle without any trouble. The entire country was

empty.

“I don’t like this one bit!” Conner said. “This is definitely a trap! Any minute now we’ll be attacked by the witch’s horrible creatures!”

Even as his anxious voice echoed through the halls of the castle, not a single soul revealed itself. They traveled through the vacant castle and found a long throne room. It had high windows that offered impressive views of the dreary land surrounding it.

“I don’t get it,” Conner said as he looked around the throne room. “Where is everyone?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Alex said with a sigh. “Our uncle got here before us. He recruited the witch and her army. We’re too late!”

Defeated, Alex had a seat on the Wicked Witch’s throne. Suddenly, a winged creature flew out from under the seat in a panic. It was frightened and moved so fast, none of them could tell what it was. It flew toward a window but didn’t realize the window was closed, and it smashed into the glass.

The creature fluttered to the floor and started whimpering. They gathered around it and stared in awe. It was a small monkey, no larger than a cat. He had plump rosy cheeks, brown fur, and wore a tiny vest. A pair of bat-like wings grew out of his back.

“It’s a baby flying monkey,” Red said with delight. “Hello there, little fella! You are the cutest thing I’ve seen since we got here.”

The baby screeched and lunged at them, trying to defend himself from the newcomers. However, the monkey was more frightened than anyone, and his efforts only made him seem more adorable.

“That’s all right, little guy, we aren’t going to hurt you,” Conner said.

A banana magically appeared in Alex’s hand, and she handed it to him. The monkey was very grateful for the food and ate the whole thing in just a few bites. Alex got to her knees and smiled at him.

“Can you talk?” she asked.

“Yes,” the monkey said with a high voice like a toddler’s.

“What’s your name?”

“Blubo,” the monkey said.

“What happened, Blubo?” Alex asked. “Why are you here all by yourself?”

She was calm and friendly. He knew there was no reason to fear her.

“A man came to see the witch in the castle,” Blubo said. “He had a bag of books with him and a pair of sparkly silver shoes. He told the witch he had killed the Wicked Witch of the East and taken them from her, and if the witch wanted them, she would have to help him.”

“You’re doing a great job, Blubo,” Alex said. “Can you remember what the man asked the witch for?”

The monkey batted his eyes at her. “Can I have another banana first?” he asked.

“Certainly,” Alex said.

She snapped her fingers and a bowl of bananas appeared. Blubo went to town as he finished the story. He was much more animated now that he had something in his stomach.

“The man told the witch he knew she wanted the silver shoes,” the monkey said. “He said if she let him use her army of Winkies, and wolves, and crows, bees, and flying monkeys, he would give her the shoes. The wicked witch agreed and they all left—*these are great bananas, by the way!*”

“Do you know where they went?” Alex asked.

“The man took a book out of his bag and poured this funny blue water on it,” he said. “The book magically lit up! Then all the Winkies, and wolves, and crows, and bees, and flying monkeys, and the Wicked Witch followed the man inside!”

The twins looked at their friends with worried eyes. This was what they’d feared.

“Why did you stay behind?” Conner asked.

“The Wicked Witch wears a golden cap that controls the flying monkeys,” Blubo said. “But I am young and the cap has no control over me. I stayed behind, but my family was forced to go against their will. I hope they’ll be all right.”

“Did they leave the book behind?” Alex asked.

“The man had the Wicked Witch order me to throw it off the castle’s balcony when they were gone,” he said. “The man said he had to get rid of it because others would be looking for it.”

“Why is Lloyd discarding the books he’s traveling into?” Jack asked. “Your grandmother said the books are the only way in and out of each story.”

“He saw us in Kansas during the cyclone,” Conner said. “He knows we’re following him into the stories. He must have another way home if he’s getting rid of the books.”

“But how is that possible?” Goldilocks asked.

They all fell silent for a moment as they each thought about it. What else could the twins’ uncle have that would give him access to the fairy-tale world?

“I know,” Red said. “Charlie had a book called *A Treasury of Fairy Tales* in his library. It had all of our stories inside of it—although, I didn’t care for the illustrations of me. I bet he’s going to use the Portal Potion on it to get back to our world.”

This gave their uncle an even greater advantage. He could move freely between worlds, rather than following the rules of the potion like the twins and their friends were forced to.

Conner went to the nearest window and searched for the balcony. “We have to find the book,” he said. “That might take us forever!”

“No, it won’t,” Blubo said. “Like I said, the golden cap doesn’t work on me, so I didn’t have to follow the witch’s orders. I hid the book instead.”

“Where?” Alex asked. “May we see it?”

The monkey thought it over. “If I give it to you, will you defeat the Wicked Witch and free my family from her?”

He looked up at them with large, desperate eyes. The twins couldn’t promise him anything, but they needed the book desperately.

“We can promise to *try*,” Alex said. “There are a lot of people we’re hoping to save by going after this man—a lot of families just like yours we’ll be helping.”

Blubo looked back and forth at them. He reached into his vest and pulled out a small book with a green cover. He handed it to Alex and she read the title. Her eyes grew wide.

“*Peter Pan,*” she told the others. “He’s going to Neverland next.”

“What’s in Neverland?” Goldilocks asked.

“Captain Hook and the pirates are,” Conner said with a heavy heart.

The others didn’t have to ask the twins any questions to know this made their situation go from bad to worse.

“Then let’s go after them,” Jack said. “We won’t solve anything by sitting around the castle.”

They huddled together and formed the next phase of their plan.

“Since we don’t have an alternative way home like our uncle, someone needs to stay in Oz and keep an eye on the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* book and the *Peter Pan* book we travel into,” Conner said.

“I’ll stay,” Goldilocks said.

“Then I’m staying, too,” Jack said.

“Jack, I’ll be perfectly fine in the castle,” she argued. “They’ll need *one of us* with them.”

“I’m not leaving the mother of my unborn child,” Jack said. “If they should need us, we’ll only be a book away.”

It was settled. Conner pulled out the yellow book tucked in the back of his belt and gave it to Jack and Goldilocks to look after. Alex placed the green book on the floor in the center of the room and flipped it open. As expected, a bright beam of light shot directly out of it and up to the high ceiling of the castle.

“I have a feeling there’s a lot more to you people than what I’ve been told,” the Tin Woodman said. He had been quiet up to this point, but seeing the book magically light up forced him to break his silence.

“We *may* have skipped a few of the details,” Conner said sheepishly.

“Can you still give me a heart as promised?” he asked hopefully.

“Sure,” Conner said. “But it may take us a little longer than we realized.”

“If I assist you further in your quest, could it get me a heart faster?” the Tin Woodman said.

Alex and Conner looked at each other and shrugged. “It couldn’t hurt,” Alex said.

“Then I am at your service,” the Tin Woodman said.

The twins, Red, Mother Goose, Lester, and the Tin Woodman stood in a circle around the beam of light.

“Is everyone ready?” Alex said. The others each gave her a confident nod.

“Here we go again,” Conner said. “Next stop, *Neverland!*”

Chapter Sixteen

DITCHING THE DARLINGS

Alex and Conner stepped through the beam of light and left the witch's castle and the Land of Oz behind. They waited as the words from the new story built an entirely new world around them. The Tin Woodman, Red, Mother Goose, and Lester arrived a moment later and observed their newest location in wonder.

"*Extraordinary,*" the Tin Woodman said. "I've never seen a place like this."

"It's spectacular!" Red said, and placed a hand over her heart. "Look at all the elegant buildings! The lamps! The paved streets! I wasn't expecting Neverland to be so *sophisticated*!"

"Guys, this isn't Neverland," Conner said. "We're in *London*."

They were standing in a small square park bordered by streets and rows of tasteful town houses. It was very late and all the streetlamps were lit. The twins were very amused by how much the classic English neighborhood enchanted their friends. The Tin Woodman and Red didn't care what this place was called; it was still just as marvelous and foreign as anything else they might have seen.

"Hello, London!" Mother Goose said. "Boy, we've had some good times here, haven't we, Lester?"

Lester nodded with large eyes. He remembered things very differently. Conner picked up the copy of *Peter Pan* and tucked it safely into Lester's saddle.

A horse and buggy passed them on the street. The driver wore a tall top hat and had a thick mustache. Red and the Tin Woodman gave the driver a friendly curtsy and bow. He stared at them very strangely, as if his mind was playing tricks on him, and continued down the street without acknowledging them.

“What year does this story take place?” Mother Goose asked. “Is it before or after the Great Fire of London—*purely curious, not that I had anything to do with it.*”

“The early nineteen hundreds,” Alex said.

“Mother Goose, have you been in this story before?” Red asked.

“London is a city in the Otherworld, and it’s where this story begins, just like Kansas,” Alex explained.

“Then I’m afraid to ask how we get to Neverland,” Red said, already dreading it. “Hurricane? Earthquake? Sinkhole?”

“Of course not,” Conner said. “That would be ridiculous. We *fly* to Neverland.”

“Fly what?” Mother Goose asked.

“Mother Goose, I can’t believe how unfamiliar you are with these stories,” Conner said. “After all the time you’ve spent in the Otherworld, how do you not know about Peter Pan?”

“I was too busy spreading stories with your grandmother and the other fairies to read any of them,” she said. “So who is this Pan fellow? Is he a pilot?”

“Right now, he’s our only hope of finding and stopping Uncle Lloyd,” Alex said. “Come with me, we’ve got to look for him.”

Alex hurried down the street and the others followed behind her. She carefully looked over every town house they passed. Occasionally she would climb over a gate and peer through a window to see the inside of a house.

“What are we looking for?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“The Darlings’ house,” Alex said. “Peter visits the Darlings’ nursery in the beginning of the book. I should know it when I see it—*everybody, quiet!*”

Without warning, Alex pushed her brother and Red into the flowerbed and dragged the Tin Woodman, Mother Goose, and Lester behind the pillars of the porch they were inspecting.

A man and a woman emerged from the town house across the street. The man promptly locked the door of their home and escorted the woman down the street. They were dressed up in a suit and gown and were in mid-conversation.

“I’m telling you, George, I know what I saw,” the woman said.

“Mary, your imagination has run off with your mind.” George laughed.

“I was not imagining it,” Mary insisted. “Last night, after I read the children a bedtime story, as I sat sewing while the children fell asleep, I saw him—a boy outside the window of the nursery!”

“My dear, there is nothing outside the window of the nursery but air,” George said.

“Then he was *floating*,” Mary said. “Nana saw him, too! She snapped the window shut and he disappeared.”

“Imagine that,” George said.

“Don’t mock me, George, I wouldn’t say such things if they weren’t true. Anyway, he left his shadow behind. I put it in a drawer for safekeeping. I do suppose he’ll be coming back for it.”

“His *shadow?*” George couldn’t believe the words coming out of his wife’s mouth. “Mary, I’ve heard enough. You’ve been cooped up with the children for far too long and you need a break. Now, let’s enjoy the rest of our night without any more talk of such nonsense, I beg you.”

George and Mary turned the corner and disappeared down another street.

“The wife sounds like a loon,” Mother Goose whispered.

“No, she’s telling the truth,” Alex said. “Any minute now Peter Pan and a pixie named Tinker Bell will appear at the windows of the nursery. I have to admit, I’m excited to see them!”

Everyone stared at the tall windows at the very top of the town house and waited for the boy and the pixie to appear. They waited and waited, but nothing was happening. They watched the windows until their necks started to ache. The others had seats on the steps of the town house, but Alex stayed put—she wasn’t going to miss anything.

“Any minute now!” Alex said cheerfully. “We’ll grab him, ditch the Darlings, and head to Neverland!”

A couple of long hours later, there was still no sign of Peter Pan or Tinker Bell. Then they heard a couple of voices and everyone’s heart jumped—*this was it*. They quickly resumed their positions behind the pillars and in the flowerbed. However, it was only George and Mary returning to the street on their way home.

“This isn’t right,” Alex said. “They’re not supposed to be back yet! Peter Pan should have taken Wendy, Michael, and John to Neverland by now.”

As Mr. and Mrs. Darling walked up the front steps of their town house, Conner felt a soft breeze. He looked down the street and saw a young boy peeking out from behind a neighboring town house's chimney. He flew from one chimney to the next, creeping closer to the Darlings' home.

"Guys!" Conner whispered. *"Look! It's Peter!"*

They all turned in the direction Conner was pointing and saw "the boy who wouldn't grow up" himself. He had messy auburn hair, rosy cheeks, and clothes made of green and brown leaves.

Peter hovered behind the chimney of the Darlings' neighbors' house until George and Mary went inside their home. As soon as they shut the door, he dashed to the windows of the nursery, all the while never casting a shadow on anything below him.

Alex pointed at the window and it locked before Peter got there. He pulled on the window, but it wouldn't budge. He grew very worried and looked inside. When he didn't see anything moving, he lightly knocked on the glass.

"Tink?" Peter whispered. *"Tink, are you in there? Did the woman trap you with my shadow?"*

When there was no response, Peter's posture sank and he dropped a few feet in altitude. He quickly flew off into the night, searching the sky and streets around him.

"After him!" Alex told the others. "We can't lose him!"

They followed Peter on the streets below, chasing after him as if he were a loose balloon. It became increasingly difficult to keep up with him; the longer he searched, the less inclined he was to stay in line with the streets. He flew over several streets at once, jumping from neighborhood to neighborhood.

"We're not going to find him at this rate!" Red said.

"I agree, we're rats in a pigeon chase," Mother Goose said. "Lester, fly after him!"

"Wait!" Conner said when something caught his eye. "Look over *there*."

He pointed to a small park in the center of the neighborhood. Peter Pan was sitting on the very top of a statue. His face was buried in his crossed arms and he appeared to be crying. The twins and their friends snuck into the park as quickly and quietly as they could, which was especially difficult with the Tin Woodman's heavy metal boots.

“Should I say something to him?” Conner asked.

“No, let me,” Alex said. “I know exactly what to say.”

She tiptoed right up to the statue where he was seated. Peter was so upset, he didn’t hear her coming.

“Boy, why are you crying?” Alex asked, quoting the story she knew by heart.

She startled him and Peter abruptly shot into the air. When he saw she was just a girl, he posed in midair with his hands on his hips and slowly descended to the ground.

“Who are you?” Peter asked.

“My name is Alex,” she said. “And these are my friends.”

She gestured to her brother and the others and they walked farther into the park.

“Pirates!” Peter screamed when he saw them. He shielded Alex and pulled out a small dagger. “Don’t worry, Alex! I shall protect you!”

“These aren’t pirates, these are my friends,” Alex said. “They aren’t going to hurt anyone.”

“*All* adults are pirates,” Peter said, and waved his dagger at Conner and the others.

“But I’m only like a year or two older than you,” Conner said.

“I’m only like a year or two older than you,” Peter repeated with a funny voice and ugly face.

“Are you mocking me?” Conner asked.

“Are you mocking me?” Peter said.

“Dude, stop it.”

“Dude, stop it.”

“Gosh, you’re immature!”

“Gosh, you’re immature!”

Conner was beyond annoyed and grunted heavily. “I know staying young is your thing, but you *really* need to grow up!” he said.

“I know staying young is your thing—” Peter stopped mimicking him and looked at him curiously. “Wait, how did you know that?”

Alex took this as an opportunity to reposition herself between Peter and the others. “We know all about you and Neverland,” she said. “We were waiting for you at the Darlings’ house, but you were super-late—well, later than you were supposed to be. What took you so long?”

Peter put his dagger away but continued to eye them curiously. “I was looking for Tinker Bell. She’s a friend and a pixie. Last night, Tink and I were listening to Mrs. Darling read a fairy tale to the children. Mrs. Darling saw me outside the window, so I left in a hurry—I left so fast, my shadow stayed behind. Usually Tink is right beside me, but I couldn’t find her anywhere! I’ve searched the entire city, but she’s *gone!*”

“Do you have any idea where Tinker Bell might have gone?” Alex asked.

“Would she have gone back to Neverland?” Conner asked.

“No, Tink doesn’t like to fly alone,” Peter said sadly. “Now I’m all alone without a pixie or a shadow.”

“Why is the shadow such a big deal?” Conner asked.

Peter looked at him as if he had insulted a family member. “A shadow is a friend that never leaves you!” he said.

“But *yours* did,” Conner pointed out.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Peter said. “He was hoping the Darling children would wake up and their mother would read them another bedtime story. Shadow loves fairy tales.”

A perky smile came to Red’s face. “Which fairy tale was it?” she asked, and ran her fingers through her hair.

“‘Cinderella,’” Peter said.

Red slumped. “Oh…,” she said with a disappointed sigh. “You didn’t miss much—she dies in the end.”

Peter’s mouth was agape and his eyes became watery. Alex grabbed Conner’s arm and pulled him aside.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asked.

“This kid is psychotic?” he asked.

“No, about *Tinker Bell*,” she said. “It’s not a coincidence she came up missing the same time our uncle entered the story.”

“Oh, right,” Conner said. “Obviously Lloyd kidnapped her. He probably used her pixie dust to travel to Neverland and recruit Captain Hook.”

“That’s not all he’s using Tink for,” she said. “Just like he used the silver shoes on the wicked witch, he’s got to have leverage to bargain with Hook, and what does the captain want more than anything?”

“He wants to kill *Peter*,” Conner said, trying his best to remember the story. “Uncle Lloyd’s going to give Tinker Bell to Captain Hook so he can

use her as bait for *Peter*."

"Precisely," Alex said.

The twins quickly rejoined their friends and the age-defying boy.

"Peter, we know where Tinker Bell is!" Conner said.

"Where?" Peter asked. He was so excited, he flew a few feet into the air and hovered right in front of the twins.

"A very bad man has kidnapped her," Alex said. "He's using her to recruit Captain Hook and the pirates into a special army he's forming. Will you take us to Neverland? With your help, we might be able to stop him and save Tinker Bell, but we won't know until we get there."

"Of course!" Peter said. "Follow me!"

Peter shot into the sky like a rocket and disappeared from sight. He had completely forgotten to take the others along.

"This kid has some serious ADHD," Conner said.

They waited for a few moments and were relieved when Peter finally returned.

"Sorry, I forgot to give you the magic *pixie dust*!" he exclaimed. He reached into a small pouch on his belt and threw a handful of shimmering dust on each of them. *"Pow! Bam! Kaboom! Shazam!"* he said playfully, and pelted them with dust until he had none left.

"None for me, thank you," Mother Goose said when it was her turn. "The last time I had pixie dust was 1964, and the next day I woke up on top of the Brooklyn Bridge with a tattoo of John Lennon on my ankle. If we're going to fly to Neverland, I'll just ride Lester."

"Suit yourself," Peter said. "The rest of you, think lovely, wonderful thoughts!"

This was easier said than done. The group had had an exhausting and stressful couple of days, and thinking of something cheerful enough to fill their bodies with joy was rather difficult.

"Oh, come on," Peter said. "None of you can think of a single happy thought? You must be the saddest bunch I've ever met!"

"But I *can't* think of happy thoughts," the Tin Woodman said. "I would need a *heart* to do that—*WOOOO!*"

Just by mentioning a heart, the Tin Woodman rose a few feet off the ground. He hovered with his limbs spread out like an astronaut and spun like a wheel. It was a very odd feeling and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

The twins and Red were very impressed by their levitating friend. Still, manifesting a thought of pure happiness was like finding water in the desert. Peter became antsy—he had never had such trouble teaching someone to fly before.

“If you can’t think of happy thoughts, try thinking of a happy memory,” he advised. “I hope you at least have *one* happy memory.”

They closed their eyes and searched their memories, looking for that one special moment in their past when they had been the happiest.

“I’m thinking of the time Mrs. Peters told me I was a good writer,” Conner said.

“I’m remembering the time when Grandma told us we had magic in our blood,” Alex said.

Alex and Conner slowly rose into the air and grabbed each other’s hands to steady themselves. The weightless sensation made the twins laugh. They felt like they were swimming in a pool and on a roller coaster at the same time.

“Nice work!” Peter said. “Now it’s your turn, Princess.”

“It’s *Queen*, thank you very much,” Red replied.

Red was having the most trouble of anyone, which wasn’t surprising after the devastating week she had endured. She was afraid if she became too in touch with her emotions, she might sink into the ground instead.

“Come on, Red,” Conner encouraged. “You can do it!”

“Forget about the wedding,” Alex said. “Remember the time you were the most happy!”

Red closed her eyes tightly. “I’m thinking about the day I became queen of my own kingdom,” she said. She opened one eye to see if it had worked, but sadly, she was still on the ground.

A memory wasn’t going to work for her. Everything she thought of only reminded her of Froggy and how much she missed him. So instead of looking into the past for happiness, Red looked into the future.

“I’m thinking about the day I get Charlie back, and get to slaughter Morina like the cow she is!” Red declared.

The young queen propelled into the sky like a firework, screaming as she went, and rose higher than anyone. Her friends cheered and clapped for her. Red twirled through the air, fighting to keep the layers of her dress down. Eventually she managed to straighten herself out and looked down at

the others in fright—she couldn't believe how high she was.

"And away we go!" Peter said, and flew off into the night sky. Mother Goose hopped onto Lester's back and they followed the boy.

Alex, Conner, Red, and the Tin Woodman just bobbed up and down in the air like parade balloons. Floating was the easy part, but learning to *fly* took some work.

At first they tried *swimming* through the air, but they only tired themselves out. Eventually, they discovered that by putting pressure on their feet, as if they were pushing against an invisible kickboard, they could maneuver through the air. A few moments into it, they got the hang of it, and soared after Peter and Mother Goose.

Peter definitely took the scenic route on the way to Neverland. They circled above the Tower of London and looped through the Tower Bridge, narrowly avoiding a steamboat passing under it. They flew above the Thames River as it snaked through the heart of the city. Peter got so close to the water, he splashed the twins behind him.

They zigzagged through the steeples of Parliament and spiraled up to Big Ben. Peter playfully kicked the small hand of the giant clock, setting London back an hour and causing it to send a powerful chime through the city.

Because of his size and stiffness, the Tin Woodman wasn't flying as agilely as the others and kept bumping into things. He ricocheted off the roof of Parliament like a pinball.

"Sorry! Pardon me! Excuse me! My fault!" he apologized to the steeples, and chimneys, and flagpoles he slammed into.

They flew down Whitehall and over St. James Park and toward Buckingham Palace.

"Oooo, what is that?" Red yelled when she saw the palace.

"That's Buckingham Palace," Alex said. "It's where the monarchy resides."

Red was mesmerized. "What a stylish and tasteful place! Look at that beautiful statue out front of it in the middle of the street! That looks exactly like the statue I wanted to build in celebration of Charlie's and my wedding!"

Red left the others and flew down to the gate. She peered through the bars at the palace in delight. She had to hang on to the bars tightly because

the fairy dust was making her drift back to the sky.

One of the palace guards on duty saw Red and stared at her in disbelief. It wasn't every day he saw a floating woman at the gate.

"Yoo-hoo!" Red called to him. "I just love your hat! Please tell the current monarch that Queen Red of the Center Kingdom says hello—"

Conner flew to the gate and pulled Red's hands off the bars. "Red, come on. You're gonna get left behind!"

The palace guard fainted and Red and Conner rejoined the others. Peter led them higher and higher into the sky. They left London behind and headed for the stars.

For a few minutes, the twins forgot all of their worries. They didn't feel the angst of tracking down their uncle, or the burden of stopping him, or the fear of what would happen if they failed. All the twins felt was *freedom* and the cool night air against their faces. Their spirits soared as high as their bodies. They shared a smile, knowing this was an experience they would remember for the rest of their lives.

They looked back and saw not just London but the whole world beneath them. They had left the earth's atmosphere, but the air traveled with them.

"Say, where is this Neverland, anyway?" Mother Goose asked.

"It's the second star to the right, and straight on until morning!" Peter called out.

Just as he said it, an unusually bright star appeared in the night sky ahead. The closer they flew to the star, the more they could make out a small island floating in space.

"We've made it!" Peter said. "Welcome to Neverland!"

Chapter Seventeen

ADVENTURES WITH THE LOST BOYS

Peter Pan and his fellow fliers hovered above a large fluffy cloud as they viewed the breathtaking sights of the mystical island below them.

There was a prominent mountain range in the center of Neverland, and the rest of the island was made up of hills and beaches. It was covered in forests and jungles, and there were waterfalls, rivers, streams, and bays. The water flowed through the island and spilled into an ocean that surrounded Neverland and then faded into the starry sky beyond it.

Neverland was a child's paradise, with adventure and discovery around every corner. It was everything the twins had imagined and much more.

"Do you see that smoke trail in the hills?" Peter asked, and pointed to it. "That's the Indian Camp! And over there is Mermaid Lagoon! And right there in the middle, that's where the Lost Boys and I live!"

"What about Captain Hook and the pirates? Where are they?" Alex asked.

"They're aboard the *Jolly Roger* in Pirates Bay on the other side of Neverland," he said. "Come with me, I'll show it to you!"

"No, wait!" Conner said. "We can't risk the pirates seeing us! They can't know we're here until we've formed a plan to keep them from leaving the island."

"Then we'll have to spy on them by *land*," Peter said, and seemed very excited by the challenge. "We must team up with the Lost Boys and travel to the pirate ship straightaway! If we go anywhere near the pirates, it's better to have safety in numbers!"

He dived through the cloud and flew to the island. The others followed him, except for the Tin Woodman, who went around the cloud, fearing it might cause him to rust. They carefully surveyed the land as they descended, hoping their presence went undetected.

Peter guided them to a tropical area in the heart of Neverland. The region was covered in sand and large plants with enormous leaves. Peter crowed like a bird, letting the Lost Boys know he had returned home.

Just as they were about to land, Conner heard a soft *whooshing* go past his face. He didn't think much of it at first, but then the sound continued and increased—it was happening all around them now. He turned to his sister to ask if she was hearing it, too, when he saw something very small and thin fly between them.

"What on earth—EVERYONE, LOOK OUT!" Conner yelled.

It was the sound of *arrows* being shot at them from the trees below. The twins and their friends dodged them the best they could, but the arrows were so thin, they barely saw them coming. They hit the Tin Woodman and bounced in all directions.

"OUCH!" Red screamed. The twins looked back and saw an arrow sticking out of her behind. "I'VE BEEN SHOT!"

Red went pale and her eyes fluttered shut. She fell the rest of the way to the island and crashed on the sandy ground. Peter, the twins, the Tin Woodman, and Mother Goose and Lester landed and rushed to her side.

"Red, are you all right?" Alex asked.

Mother Goose had a good look at the arrow sticking into Red and yanked it out. Red instantly came back to life and sat up.

"EASY! That hurts!" she said.

"Relax—your dress is so thick, it was barely touching your skin," Mother Goose said.

"Peter, what's happening? Are the Indians attacking us?" Conner asked frantically.

Peter had a look at the flimsy arrow. "Nope," he said. "Indian arrows would have killed you."

A group of six young boys charged out from the trees. They were howling animal noises and chanting war calls as they ran. They raised handmade bows and arrows, swords, hammers, and clubs into the air. All of them were filthy and wore clothes made of leaves, bark, animal skin, and whatever else they could find on the island.

The boys came to a stop when they saw Peter standing with the newcomers.

"Peter!" they all said in unison.

“Hello, boys!” he said. “I’ve returned to Neverland!”

They cheered and jumped for joy—they seemed fairly easy to please.

“Lost Boys, let me introduce you to my new friends,” Peter said, but he wasn’t good with names. “New friends, these are the Lost Boys: Tootles, Nibs, Slightly, Curly, and the twins.”

Each of the Lost Boys gave the newcomers a ferocious look and growl as Peter called their name. They each tried *out-growling* the previous one, but it wasn’t intimidating in the slightest. No matter how loud they growled, they were still just little boys.

Tootles was the oldest of the boys and wore a pair of thick glasses. Nibs was very scrappy and was missing the most baby teeth of all of them. Slightly was the most sophisticated of the bunch and wore a tie made of vines.

Curly was the chubbiest of the boys and his clothes were very tight. The Lost Boy twins were identical and the youngest. They moved in such perfect synchronization, it was like they shared the same brain.

“Look, it’s the giant bird we tried to shoot down!” Tootles said, and pointed to Lester.

“Let’s get him before he flies away!” Nibs shouted.

“We’ll cook him and eat for days!” Curly said.

“It’s been ages since we had a proper meal,” Slightly said.

“Attack!” the Lost twins said.

The Lost Boys licked their lips and ran after Lester like savages. Lester hid behind Mother Goose and Peter blocked the boys from attacking him.

“Boys, leave the bird alone!” Peter commanded. “He’s a friend of Alex, and any friend of Alex is a friend of mine!”

The Lost Boys slumped and kicked the sand. “Yes, Peter,” they said together. Their excitement quickly returned as soon as they saw the Tin Woodman.

“Look at that man!” Tootles said.

“He’s made of metal!” Slightly said.

“We could turn him into an oven!” Curly said.

“And weapons!” Nibs said.

“Attack!” the Lost twins said.

The Lost Boys chased the Tin Woodman and tackled him to the ground. They chanted war calls and beat him with their weapons.

“Hey! Stop that! Knock it off!” the Tin Woodman said.

The others couldn’t believe what they were seeing. The Lost Boys were the worst-behaved children in the universe. It was as if they were playing characters in a wild game of pretend, but the game never ended.

“And *that’s* why I never reproduced,” Mother Goose said.

“I don’t think these children are qualified to help us,” Red whispered to the twins.

The twins were getting frustrated—they couldn’t afford to lose any more time. Alex waved her hand and a strong wind blew the Lost Boys off the Tin Woodman. They got to their feet and huddled in fear.

“She’s a witch!” the Lost Boys yelled, and pointed at her.

“I’m much scarier than a witch,” Alex said. “And if any of you brats try to hunt, shoot, or attack one of my friends again, I’ll turn you all into birds and hunt you myself!”

“Peter, why would you bring a witch back to Neverland?” Tootles asked.

“I can’t believe Tink let you do this,” Nibs said.

“She’s going to give me nightmares!” Curly confessed.

“Wait a second, where *is* Tink?” Slightly asked.

“Tinker Bell?” the Lost twins asked.

The Lost Boys looked all around the island for their pixie friend, but she was nowhere to be found.

Peter broke the news. “Tinker Bell has been kidnapped. I brought Alex and her friends back to Neverland to help us rescue Tink from the man who stole her!”

“Kidnapped?” Curley said in shock.

“Not Tinker Bell!” Tootles said, and burst into tears.

“He’ll pay for this!” Nibs said with a vengeful scream.

“But *who* kidnapped her?” Slightly asked.

“Yeah, who?” the Lost twins asked.

Peter looked at Alex and Conner—perhaps it was best if one of them explained.

“He’s a terrible man who wants to recruit Captain Hook and the other pirates for a special army,” Alex said. “We’ve got to find and stop him before he leaves Neverland with the pirates and Tinker Bell!”

The Lost Boys shook with rage—they were furious someone would do this to their friend.

“We’ll leave for the *Jolly Roger* at once!” Nibs said.

“We’ll stop them from leaving with Tinker Bell!” Tootles said.

“We’ll show those pirates no mercy!” Slightly said.

“We’ll take no prisoners!” Curly said.

“Attack!” the Lost twins said.

Each Lost Boy was more passionate than the next. They didn’t need much explanation to get excited about something.

“Guys, calm down, it’s not that simple,” Conner said. “This man we’re talking about isn’t alone. He has wolves, and crows, and bees, and flying monkeys, and an army of Winkies with him. We won’t stand a chance if we just barge onto the ship and start a fight. We need to see the ship and come up with a plan to stop them.”

Once again, the Lost Boys slumped and they kicked the sand. All they wanted to do was attack *something* today—was that too much to ask?

“You heard him, boys!” Peter said, and flew into the air. “Let’s lead our new friends to the pirates and see what we’re up against!”

He flew into the trees and the Lost Boys ran after him. The twins looked at the others and shrugged.

“I guess we should follow them,” Alex said.

“This is going to go horribly wrong,” Red said.

“There’s not much else we can do,” Mother Goose said. “Let’s just follow the Boy Scouts from Hades and hope for the best.”

They exchanged looks, each more apprehensive than the last, but Mother Goose was right. Peter quickly returned with some information he had forgotten to share.

“A friendly warning to watch your step,” he said. “The Lost Boys like setting traps.”

They carefully followed Peter and the Lost Boys to the other side of the island. The Neverland jungles were filled with grotesque reptiles and repulsive insects—a little boy’s dream. Red almost had a panic attack at the sight of them. She closed her eyes and let the twins guide her so she could pretend she was somewhere else.

They arrived at Pirates Bay and hid behind a row of boulders on the beach. The *Jolly Roger* was an enormous ship made of red and black wood and took up the majority of the bay. Alex and Conner never had too much experience with pirate ships, but Captain Hook’s was by far the most

impressive one they had ever seen.

They heard lots of voices and activity coming from the ship, but the *Jolly Roger* was so tall, they couldn't see anything happening on deck.

"Can we get any closer?" Conner asked.

"Not without the pirates seeing us," Peter said.

A small rowboat was lowered off the ship. It only had one passenger and the twins didn't need to be any closer to recognize him.

"Conner, look!" Alex said. "It's Uncle Lloyd!"

"What's he doing?" Conner asked.

He didn't appear frustrated or defeated, as if the pirates were kicking him off their ship. On the contrary, he looked rather excited.

Lloyd rowed the boat to the center of the bay and stopped. He waved a white handkerchief at the ship. A pirate watching from the crow's nest waved a handkerchief back and then whistled to the pirates on deck.

The sails were raised and they filled the sky, soaking up the ocean breeze. The *Jolly Roger* crept into the bay, heading directly for Lloyd and the rowboat. Lloyd pulled out the blue potion bottle from his lapel pocket and poured a few drops of it onto a red book. A bright beam shined directly out of it and toward the sky.

"He and the book are going to get crushed if he doesn't get out of the way!" Mother Goose said. "Granted, my knowledge about ships isn't that great; I was only on the *Mayflower* for a weekend."

The twins watched in anticipation—what could their uncle possibly have up his sleeve now? To their astonishment, the *Jolly Roger* rose out of the water and flew into the air!

"How is that possible?" Red gasped.

"They must have used Tink's pixie dust on the entire ship!" Peter said.

It flew over the rowboat and into the beam of light. The entire ship, the pirates, and everyone else on board disappeared from Neverland and entered the red book's story. Lloyd cheered from the rowboat as he watched the ship vanish: Another phase of his plan was complete.

The twins' uncle wrapped a heavy chain around the book's back cover. In one swift move, he jumped into the beam himself and dropped the book into the ocean. Lloyd disappeared and the red book sank to the bottom of the bay.

The twins and the other onlookers ran out from behind the boulders and

stared at the bay in disbelief.

“I can’t believe he did it,” Alex said. “He left with not only Captain Hook and the pirates, but with their whole ship, too!”

“Did they just travel inside a magic book?” Peter asked the twins.

“Don’t start asking questions now, kid,” Mother Goose said. “Your head will explode.”

“We’ve got to get that book,” Conner said, eyeing the water. “All right, raise your hand if you’re a good swimmer! Nibs, I’m assuming it’s you.”

“The bay is too deep for any human to reach the bottom,” Peter said. “But I know something that can. Boys, let’s take our friends to the *lagoon!*”

Chapter Eighteen

MERMAID LAGOON

Peter and the Lost Boys led the others to another part of Neverland where Mermaid Lagoon was located. The lagoon was the most serene place they had been to on the island by far.

The shallow water was separated from the ocean by a reef wall. It was shaded entirely by tall willow trees that grew around the edge of the water. Boulders were sprinkled throughout the water, allowing Peter, the twins, and the Lost Boys to hop from rock to rock until they reached the center of the lagoon.

Mother Goose, Lester, and Red waited on land, where they knew it was safe. Conner leaned over his rock and looked into the water, but all he saw were small fish swimming between the boulders.

“Do you think they’ll be willing to help us?” Alex asked.

“I’m not sure; we’ve never asked them for help before,” Peter said. “They like me, but usually they try drowning the Lost Boys whenever they get too close.”

“Can you repeat that?” Conner asked with a gulp.

Suddenly, a webbed hand with long nails shot out of the water and grabbed Conner’s foot. More hands appeared throughout the lagoon and tried pulling the twins and the Lost Boys into the water, but they helped one another kick the hands away. Dozens of mermaids had arrived, and they were nothing like the twins had expected.

Unlike the colorful and angelic mermaids in the fairy-tale world, the mermaids of Neverland were nasty and sinister-looking creatures. Their skin was slimy and so pale, it practically glowed. They had red, slanted eyes and thin, flat nostrils. Instead of hair, they had long fins that stuck straight up like Mohawks. They had several piercings and wore small fish bones as jewelry.

“I thought the Neverland mermaids were supposed to be beautiful!” Conner whispered to his sister.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” Alex whispered.

“What are you doing in our part of the island?” the mermaid closest to Conner hissed. She wore a necklace of shells that the others did not, so he figured she must have held some authority among the other mermaids.

“We don’t mean any harm,” Conner said. “We’ve come to your lagoon to ask you a favor!”

The mermaid blinked a couple times and flared her nostrils. She exchanged a confused look with the other mermaids, but none of them understood what he was talking about.

“What’s a *favor*?” the mermaid asked.

“It’s something you do for someone else when they need help,” Alex said.

The mermaids took a moment to process this and howled with laughter, exposing their jagged little shark-like teeth.

“We don’t do favors,” the mermaid said. “Especially with the *Lost Boys*!”

The lagoon erupted in chaos as the Lost Boys and the mermaids insulted one another. The twins couldn’t let this continue any longer—it was wasting time, and the mermaids were their only hope.

“SILENCE!” Alex yelled. “I want all the Lost Boys to go back to land, and my brother and I will talk to the mermaids *alone*!”

The boys separated from the creatures, exchanging a couple more insults and splashes as they went.

“We aren’t going to get anywhere with favors,” Alex said to the mermaids. “So why don’t we negotiate a *trade*?”

“That depends,” the mermaid said. “What is a *trade*?”

“It’s when you give something and get something in return,” Alex explained.

“We can’t blame you for not liking the Lost Boys,” Conner said. “We just got here and *we* can’t stand them, either. But if you could pick one thing that the Lost Boys did that annoys you the most, what would you choose?”

The mermaids looked at one another and thought it over. They spoke to one another in high-pitched growls and clicks—apparently they had their

own language.

“They take all of our fish!” the mermaid hissed. “They have plenty of food to hunt on land and in the sky, but we’re limited to the fish in the waters.”

“Wonderful,” Alex said, and clapped her hands. “So if we convince the Lost Boys to stop fishing in your waters, will you do something in return for us?”

“What do you want in return?”

“There’s a book wrapped in a chain at the bottom of Pirates Bay,” Conner said. “We need you to retrieve it for us.”

Once again the mermaids exchanged growls and clicks. Their language sounded like a mix of dolphin and bat sounds.

“Yes,” the mermaid said. “That is a trade we are willing to make.”

“Great!” Alex said. “Hold that thought.”

The twins hopped across the boulders back to land and filled the Lost Boys in on the trade they had negotiated with the mermaids.

“What? We’ll never stop fishing!” Peter said. “Fishing is one of the Lost Boys’ favorite things to do!”

“Do you want to see Tinker Bell again or not?” Conner yelled.

Peter and the Lost Boys all sighed and nodded their heads. The twins returned to the mermaids with the good news.

“It’s settled!” Alex said. “Enjoy your fish!”

The mermaids looked back and forth between the twins and the Lost Boys—they weren’t sure if they liked this whole *trading* thing, but they weren’t going to be the first ones to break their end of the bargain.

“We’ll meet you at Pirates Bay,” the mermaid told the twins. She clicked at the other mermaids and they dived below the waters.

The twins and their friends returned to Pirates Bay as quickly as they could. The mermaids were waiting for them in the water when they arrived. Alex and Conner told them exactly where they had seen the book sink and the mermaids went to retrieve it. They resurfaced a few moments later and handed the twins the book.

“Thank you so much!” Alex said. “We promise the Lost Boys will keep their end of the trade—*right?*”

“Right,” the Lost Boys repeated unenthusiastically.

The mermaids splashed them one more time and swam away. Alex

unraveled the damp book from the chain and read the title to the others.

"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," she said. "Lloyd must be going after the Queen of Hearts and her card soldiers next!"

The Tin Woodman mistook this as good news. "The Queen of *Hearts*?" he said with a smile.

"Don't get excited—she's loud and awful," Conner said, and then let out a long sigh. "This trip just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?"

"Are you going to travel inside the magic book like the *Jolly Roger* did?" Peter asked.

Alex and Conner nodded. "We don't have a choice," Alex said. "It's the only way we're going to stop them—if we even can at this rate."

"Then I'm coming with you!" Peter declared. "I will not rest until Tinker Bell is back in Neverland with me and the Lost Boys!"

"That's awfully brave, Peter, but it's going to be very dangerous," Conner said. "You could get seriously hurt or even get killed!"

Peter retrieved his dagger and raised it to the sky. "To die will be an awfully big adventure!" he proclaimed.

Alex and Conner looked at each other, thinking the same thing—they weren't going to get rid of him. Rather than spending time arguing, the twins went right into forming the next phase of their own plan.

"One of us needs to stay in Neverland and look after the books," Alex said. "Who's it going to be this time?"

The twins, the Tin Woodman, Mother Goose, and Lester all turned to Red. Her eyes grew large and her whole body tightened—every part of her rejected the idea.

"Don't even think about it," Red said. "I'm not staying on this island."

"Red, I don't mean to sound rude, but you're the least *useful* in the group," Conner said. "We need you to stay here and make sure nothing happens to the books."

"These *savages* have already shot me," Red said, and pointed at the Lost Boys. "What do you think they'll do to me when I'm alone?"

"Red, I promise you'll be safer here than in Wonderland," Alex said.

Red couldn't believe her ears. She might as well have been persuaded to walk off a cliff. The twins didn't give her any more chance to argue. Before she knew it, Conner was handing her their copy of *Peter Pan* as if the decision was final.

“Boys, I order you to listen to Miss Red,” Peter instructed. “I want you to protect her and make her very comfortable while we’re away. Treat her like you would your own mother.”

The Lost Boys were very excited by this idea. Red looked like she was going to be sick.

“Yes, sir!” Tootles said, and saluted Peter.

“Now just wait one minute! Am I supposed to sleep in the jungle?” Red asked, but none of her friends were listening anymore.

“Of course not; we’ll build you a home!” Nibs said.

“I don’t like the sound of that!”

“I’ve always wanted a mother,” Slightly said.

“Well, keep dreaming!”

“Can we call you Mother, Miss Red?” Curly asked.

“Certainly not!”

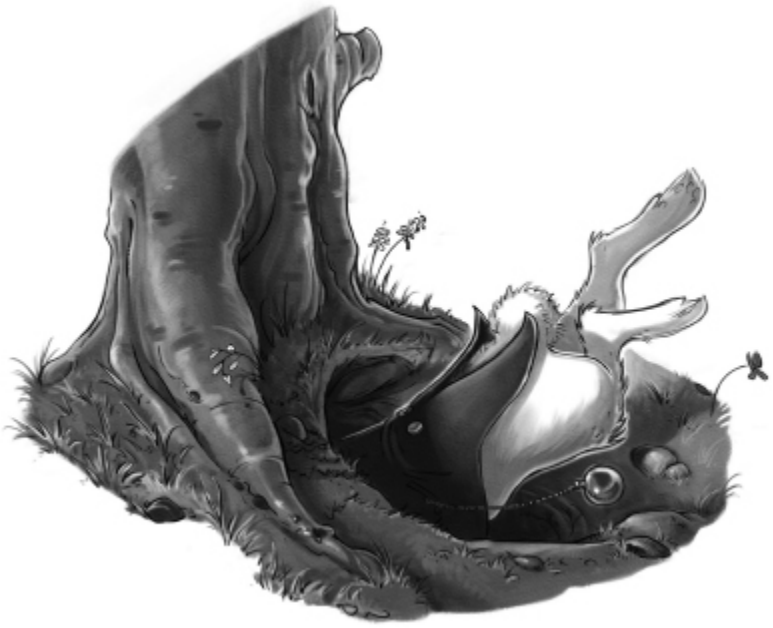
“Mother!” the Lost twins shouted.

“We have a mother! We have a mother! We have a mother!” the Lost Boys chanted.

Red felt like her friends had just fed her to a pack of hungry wolves. She tried to fight the decision, but it was too late. The twins, the Tin Woodman, Mother Goose, Lester, and Peter were already gathered around the next book.

Alex opened *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and a beam of light shot into the sky. “We’ll have to get to the queen’s palace as quickly as possible,” she said. “If we don’t catch up with Lloyd in this story, we may *never* stop him.”

They entered the beam and departed Neverland, hoping with all their hearts that Wonderland would be their final stop.



Chapter Nineteen

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

The twins and their friends traveled into *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* safely and took in the newly formed environment. Once again, Conner picked up the book and tucked it safely away, this time into Lester's saddle.

"To quote my friend Amelia Earhart, *boy am I glad to get off that island!*" Mother Goose said. "I wouldn't be surprised if Tinker Bell got herself kidnapped on purpose just to get away from those awful children."

"Is this Wonderland?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"Doesn't look very *wondrous* to me," Peter said, and crossed his arms. "In fact, it looks just like the English countryside."

"That's because it *is* the English countryside," Alex said. "Trust me, once we get to Wonderland, you'll know it."

The countryside was very picturesque. Rolling green hills and trees of all kinds surrounded them and a quiet river ran beside them. It was very comfortable outside, and judging from the different shades of golden leaves, the twins figured it was the beginning of autumn.

They heard noises coming from down the river and realized they weren't alone. A young woman escorted a little girl out of the trees and across a stone bridge. They appeared to be in the middle of an argument. The twins and their friends hid behind trees and eavesdropped.

"We mustn't leave the bank at a time like this," the little girl fussed. She was a very pretty child and held a small cat in her arms. She wore a bow in her hair and a lacy apron over her dress.

"Alice, I'm taking you home to Mother so she can put you down for a nice nap," the young woman said. She was pretty, too—an older version of her sister.

"You're the worst sister in the world!" Alice said. "If you had seen the flying pirate ship, I would have believed you! Dinah saw it, too, and it gave

her quite the shock, the poor dear!”

She kissed the cat’s forehead and cradled her tightly. In Alice’s defense, the cat looked utterly freaked out.

“Then I’m afraid you’ve both gone mad,” the sister said. “Now come along. If you mention the pirate ship one more time, I’m going to have a word with Father. ”

The sister took Alice by the hand and they crossed the bridge and headed home.

“We’re definitely in the right place,” Conner said.

“Certainly are,” Alex said. “All we need now is the—”

Something white and fluffy suddenly dashed across the countryside in the distance and caught their attention.

“What is that?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“That’s our ticket to Wonderland,” Alex said. “Quick, everyone follow that rabbit!”

The twins, the Tin Woodman, Peter, Mother Goose, and Lester sprinted into the countryside after the furry animal. He hopped along a dirt path and then dashed into the trees. It was hard to follow him with all the leaves and tall grass obstructing their view, but luckily the White Rabbit paused every few hundred yards or so. He would remove a golden watch from the pocket of his waistcoat and check the time.

“Oh, dear! I’m terribly late!” the White Rabbit said, and raced deeper into the countryside.

They chased the White Rabbit over a tall hill and into a small valley. They all gasped and came to a halt. The enormous *Jolly Roger* was lying on its side in the valley. Thankfully, the ship appeared to be vacant, as if the pirates had parked it there.

The White Rabbit hopped to a hedge and climbed into a wide hole under the hedge’s roots. The twins and the others caught up to the hedge just a moment before the rabbit disappeared. They stared into the rabbit hole while they caught their breath.

“Before we go down there, it’s important for everyone to know a few facts about Wonderland,” Alex said.

“Oh, *now* she decides to give us a heads-up,” Mother Goose said.

“Wonderland is a place of trickery and confusion,” Alex said. “Nothing makes sense and nothing is as it seems. We have to stay together at all

times, so never travel too far away from the group. Don't trust a word anyone says, no matter how friendly they seem. Wonderland will drive you mad if you aren't careful."

They all took a deep breath and rallied up some courage.

"On the count of three we'll jump inside," Alex said. "One… two… *three!*"

They jumped into the rabbit hole and fell down a long dirt tunnel. They fell and they fell, faster and faster, but there was no end in sight. They started seeing cupboards and bookshelves peculiarly placed along the walls of the tunnel as they went. They assumed this meant they were getting close, but they were sadly mistaken.

"Are you sure this is the right rabbit hole?" the Tin Woodman asked. "This one appears to be endless!"

"I'm positive," Alex said.

"Then let's speed things up," Mother Goose said.

She shaped her hand to look like a gun and fired an invisible bullet into the space above them. *BAAM!* A huge explosion went off, pushing them down the tunnel at rocket speed. The blast rattled the tunnel, and all the cupboards and bookshelves fell off the dirt walls and down the tunnel after them.

The twins and their friends finally reached the end of the tunnel and landed on a soft pile of leaves and twigs. They looked up and saw an avalanche of carpentry headed straight for them.

"LOOK OUT!" Conner yelled.

They jumped to their feet and dived away from the pile of leaves. The cupboards and bookshelves from the tunnel crashed to the ground and created a mountain of broken wood, glass, and teacups. It piled so high, it blocked the rabbit hole.

"I hope we weren't planning to go back that way," Mother Goose said.

They found themselves in a long and low hall. The walls were lined with doors of all shapes, sizes, and colors—there wasn't a single doorknob that was alike. Mother Goose, the Tin Woodman, and Peter tried opening the doors, but they were all locked.

"None of these doors will open," Peter said.

"It's all right," Alex said. "We're not using any of them."

Alex went to the back of the hall where a curtain was hung. She moved

the curtain aside and revealed a tiny door that was about a foot tall. She looked through the tiny keyhole and saw a beautiful garden on the other side—*Wonderland*.

"This is the door we need!" Alex said. She got to her feet and looked around the hall. "Now, there should be a golden key somewhere."

Alex found a glass table pushed to the side, but there was no key on top of it like she was expecting.

"Oh, no," she said. "Uncle Lloyd must have taken the key with him when he passed through. We'll have to find another way in. Everyone, stand back, I'm going to enchant it—"

CRASH! Without instruction, the Tin Woodman kicked the small door open.

"Apologies," he said. "I figured this would be faster."

Alex looked like she was about to kiss him. "Good thinking."

"How are we going to fit through the door?" Mother Goose said. "Lester will never squeeze through something that small."

Lester gave her a dirty look as if to say, *"But YOU will?"*

"There should be a bottle somewhere that makes us shrink—oh, here it is!" Conner said. He found the bottle, with a ribbon tied around it, on top of the glass table. The ribbon read:

DRINK ME

Conner uncorked the bottle. "Bottoms up!" he said.

Just as he was about to take a sip, Peter knocked the bottle out of his hands. It hit the floor and shattered, the liquid spilling everywhere.

"What did you do that for?" Conner yelled. "We needed that!"

"Conner, look at the floor!" Alex said.

The others backed away from the spill. The liquid rotted the floor, turning the checkered tile into a nasty brown.

"I knew that bottle wasn't from this place!" Peter said. "It's from Hook's ship! It was poison! They must have switched the bottles knowing we would be following them."

The twins sighed with relief—they were so glad Peter insisted on

coming along.

“How are we going to fit through the door?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“I’ll shrink us,” Alex said.

It had been a while since her powers backfired on her, and she hoped this wasn’t the moment that would break that streak. She closed her eyes and focused as hard as she could. Alex pointed to each of them and light swirled around their bodies, shrinking them all to under a foot tall. Once she changed them without trouble, she shrunk herself.

“Nice job!” Conner said, and gave his sister a hug.

The freshly shrunk group hurried through the smashed doorway and entered the gardens of Wonderland. Just as Alex had said, the others knew where they were the very second they laid eyes on it.

They felt like they had entered a painting. It was bright and colorful, but everything was oddly proportioned, as if the world were filled with abstract pieces of art. Everything moved slightly, too, as if it were swaying in a breeze, but there was no wind.

“Look at those flowers!” Peter said, and pointed into the garden ahead.

The flowers were as extraordinary as they were disturbing. Each flower grew as tall as they were. They were gorgeous colors and had beautiful plump petals. However, each flower also had a *face*. They turned to the newcomers and watched them as they walked by.

“Remember, they love tricking people in Wonderland,” Alex whispered. “Don’t talk to any of them.”

“Hello there,” a rose said.

“Welcome to the garden,” said a tulip.

“Wouldn’t you like to stay and hear us sing a song?” an orchid asked.

The group took Alex’s advice to heart and walked past the flowers without making eye contact. They kept their eyes on the ground until they were out of the garden.

“If I haven’t seen that in a nightmare before, I definitely will now,” Conner said.

They looked up and their hearts beat with excitement. In the distance, on the edge of a wood of very tall trees, they saw the White Rabbit. He had paused to look at his watch.

“Oh, dear, I am so late!” the rabbit said frantically. “I must hurry to the castle before the queen leaves!”

He dashed into the woods and they chased after him. The rabbit hopped down a paved path, but it was very difficult to follow him because the path had a mind of its own. It went sideways, it curled upside down, it coiled up trees, and sometimes it ended for no reason and they had to turn around.

Unfortunately, they lost track of the White Rabbit and he vanished from sight. They took the path in the direction they last saw him and came to a fork. The path split in two different directions, and there was a large silver fork stuck in the ground.

“Which way do we go?” Conner asked.

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “We might have to ask for directions.”

“But you said not to trust anyone here,” Peter said.

“I know, but we don’t have much choice now,” Alex said. “We’ll take the path to the right and ask the first person, plant, or animal we see.”

They followed the path to the right and traveled out of the woods, and they found themselves entering a forest of another kind.

There were mushrooms everywhere they looked. They varied from the size of normal mushrooms to the size of houses. There were polka-dot mushrooms, plaid mushrooms, rainbow mushrooms, and mushrooms of every pattern and color imaginable.

“This place is nuts!” Conner said.

An odor filled the air as they continued into the mushroom forest.

“I recognize that smell,” Mother Goose said. “It reminds me of *Morocco!*”

They figured *someone* must have been causing it, so they followed the scent off the path. Eventually they found the source of the smell and they couldn’t believe what they were seeing.

In the middle of the fungal forest, they found an enormous caterpillar lounging on top of a mushroom and smoking from a hookah. He was blue with dark spots and was very obese, even for caterpillar standards. His antennae were wrapped around his head like a turban. The caterpillar’s eyes were glazed over as if he was half-asleep, and he blew smoke rings into the air.

“Excuse me, Mr. Caterpillar?” Alex said, approaching his mushroom. “I hope we’re not bothering you, but would you kindly point us in the direction of the Castle of Hearts?”

“*Who* are you?” he asked the group in a drowsy voice.

“My name is Alex, this is my brother, Conner, and our friends Mother Goose, Lester, Mr. Woodman, and Peter.”

“*What* are you?” the caterpillar asked.

“Well, we’re all different,” she said. “I’m a girl, those two are boys, she’s an old woman, that’s a goose, and he’s a man of metal.”

The caterpillar giggled. “Different, but the same.”

“Huh?”

“Different, but the same,” he repeated, but found it just as funny the second time. “Or so it appears.”

Alex turned back to the others, but none of them had any clue what he was talking about.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” she said.

“Lost,” he stated.

“Was that a question?” Alex asked.

“A question to you, ’tis fact to me,” the caterpillar said.

Alex was so confused, she shook her head. The others felt their sanity slipping from their brains just by being in proximity to the caterpillar.

“This is going *great*,” Conner said with a massive eye roll. “This worm is clearly insane; let’s find someone who can actually help us.”

“Let me handle this one, kids,” Mother Goose said. “He’s not crazy, the hookah is just making his brain sleepy. I might understand him if I get on his level.”

Mother Goose walked up to the caterpillar and had a bouncy seat on the mushroom beside him.

“May I?” she asked, and gestured to the hookah.

The caterpillar passed it to her and Mother Goose smoked it. After a few moments, her eyes became as glossy as his and she also spoke in complete nonsense.

“Who are you?” Mother Goose asked the caterpillar.

“What I am,” he said.

“Where are you?” she said.

“Here with you,” the caterpillar said.

“And if this were the Castle of Hearts?” Mother Goose asked.

“We’d be there,” he said.

“But where?” she asked.

“In the castle,” he said.

“Ah, so there would be here,” she said, and they nodded together.

“Here would be what’s left.” The caterpillar nodded.

“Am I what’s left?” she asked.

“You’re what’s right, of course.”

“But what’s right is wrong.”

“And what’s left is right.”

“I understand completely,” Mother Goose said. “Thank you so much, Mr. Caterpillar.”

The others stared at them absolutely dumbfounded. Mother Goose hopped down from the mushroom and moseyed back to them.

“The caterpillar said to go back to the fork and take a left,” she said.

“He did?” Alex asked.

“It’s all about the keywords,” Mother Goose said. “I used to be friends with a sultan who enjoyed the hookah, too. Lester, I’m going to need you to carry me the rest of the way—I’m awfully tired.”

They left the mushroom forest and returned to the fork in the path, and traveled left instead of right. They followed the path through Wonderland until they came to a sign that read CASTLE OF HEARTS and pointed to a road that went up a very steep hill. An enormous structure was perched at the top of the hill. The windows were shaped like hearts, and the flags flying from the towers bore hearts, too.

“That’s it!” Alex said. “It’s the Queen of Hearts’s castle!”

They ran up the hill to the castle and found themselves in the queen’s gardens.

There were rosebushes throughout the garden. Most of the roses were red, others were white, and there were some that looked like a mix of the two. After further inspection the twins realized that all of the red flowers had been *painted*. It was only then they noticed that the garden was littered in brushes and paint cans. It was as if the project had come to an abrupt stop—and the twins were pretty sure they knew why.

“Let’s go inside the castle,” Alex said. “Maybe the Queen of Hearts and her card soldiers will still be there.”

They walked across the drawbridge and entered the Castle of Hearts. Much to the Tin Woodman’s delight, there were hearts everywhere. The rugs were covered in hearts, the wallpaper was hearts, and all the art was of

hearts. Even the doors and arches throughout the castle were shaped like hearts.

“Gosh, it’s like Valentine’s Day threw up in here,” Conner said.

Despite the decor, they found the castle very *disheartening*. Just like in the Wicked Witch’s castle, they didn’t find a single soul.

“No one’s here!” Alex said, and tears came to her eyes. “We’re too late again! Uncle Lloyd has already taken everyone! We’ll never catch up to him!”

“Yes, we will,” Conner said. “Even if we have to travel into every book that’s ever been written, we’ll find him and stop his army. Everyone, keep your eyes open for a book—he could have stashed it anywhere.”

They searched every corner of the castle but came up empty-handed. They walked down a long corridor and through a pair of enormous heart-shaped double doors.

The room behind the doors was massive and square. There was a giant throne at the other end of the room and a large platform in the center with a heart-shaped axe resting on top of it. Above them, the room was lined with rows and rows of benches. It was big enough to seat thousands of people.

“What is this place? A stadium?” Conner said.

“It’s a courtroom,” Alex said. “This must be where the queen has people beheaded.”

Alex walked closer to the throne and she accidentally kicked something. A flat object slid across the floor. She looked down and saw it was a *book*. It was covered in a blue jacket with the title *A Treasury of Fairy Tales.*

“I found it!” Alex called to the others. “It’s the treasury Red was talking about! Conner, they’ve returned to the fairy-tale world already!”

The twins felt sick to their stomachs. Their uncle had succeeded. He had formed the army of literary villains he had been dreaming about since he was a child, and now he was leading it into the fairy-tale world to destroy it.

“Okay, we’ve got to get back as soon as possible,” Conner said. “They must have *just* entered the fairy-tale world—they couldn’t have gotten very far. We’ll regroup with Jack, Goldilocks, and Red and go straight to the Fairy Council. We’ll show them Peter and the Tin Woodman—they’ll have to believe us! We’ll round up the armies of the kingdoms together and we’ll take our uncle down.”

Alex opened the *Treasury of Fairy Tales* and a bright beam of light

shined up from its pages.

“We’ll save time if we split up,” Alex said. “Mother Goose and I will go to the Fairy Council and show them the Tin Woodman and Peter. Conner, you travel back into Neverland and Oz and gather up the others. Travel back to the cave and start warning the kingdoms of what’s coming.”

Everyone nodded. It was the best plan they could make, given the time and the circumstances. Conner retrieved their copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* from Lester’s saddle.

“Alex, be careful,” Conner said, and gave her a hug.

“You too,” she said.

Alex, Mother Goose, and Lester quickly traveled into the beam of light and disappeared from the Castle of Hearts.

Conner opened *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. However, just as he was about to step back into Neverland, a winged creature swooped through the courtroom and stole the book.

“What the heck?” Conner said.

The creature vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Conner looked around the courtroom but didn’t see anything. The creature reappeared a moment later and stole the treasury just as the Tin Woodman and Peter were about to follow Alex and Mother Goose inside.

A sinister laugh echoed through the courtroom, but it didn’t come from any of them.

“What’s happening?” Peter asked.

Conner felt like his heart was beating out of his chest. “We’re not alone.” He was just as terrified to say it as they were to hear it.

A *thump* echoed in the courtroom. Like condensation evaporating from a window, a shield of invisibility disappeared from thousands and thousands of figures that had been inside the courtroom the entire time. Lloyd and his villain army hadn’t traveled into the fairy-tale world after all—they were *here.*

“Well, well, well,” Lloyd said. “It looks like my brave little niece and nephew have come all this way for nothing.”

Conner’s uncle appeared by the throne. He was standing with Captain Hook, the Queen of Hearts, and the Wicked Witch of the West.

Captain Hook was a tall man with long, dark, curly hair. He wore a large black hat and a heavy coat with massive shoulders. Notoriously, his right

hand was missing and had been replaced by a sharp metal hook.

The Queen of Hearts was a hideous woman. She had an abnormally large head and wide mouth and her face was unpleasantly flushed at all times. She wore a golden crown and a large unflattering gown with mismatched patterns of hearts. Her scepter and all her jewelry were hearts as well.

The Wicked Witch of the West was short and feisty. She had one large visible eye and another that was covered with an eye patch. She had three braids of thin hair and wore a pointed golden hat that allowed her to control the flying monkeys. She held a magical umbrella and used it as a cane when she walked.

The seats above them were filled with their infamous subordinates, who cheered for their respective commanders.

There were thousands of men and women in yellow armor that made up the Winkie army. They stared off into space, as if the Wicked Witch had brainwashed them. The witch's wolves, crows, bees, and flying monkeys stood and flew among them.

There were hundreds of pirates. They were all monstrous and ragged-looking men. Hook's infamous sidekick, Mr. Smee, was among them. He was an awkward, fat, and balding man with a gray beard and striped blue pants.

The Queen of Hearts's playing-card soldiers were stationed through the courtroom as well. They were each eight feet tall and four feet wide. They bore numbers and symbols of hearts, clubs, spades, and diamonds. The White Rabbit was among them and was so terrified by the creatures around him, he covered his eyes with his ears.

If all the children in the Otherworld combined their nightmares, they would be where Conner was standing right now. The Wicked Witch tapped her umbrella on the floor, creating the *thump* they had heard earlier, and a flying monkey landed at Lloyd's side. The monkey handed him the copies of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *A Treasury of Fairy Tales.*

"You've made a big mistake," Conner said to his uncle. "As soon as Alex realizes you haven't entered the fairy-tale world yet, she'll know something is wrong. She'll come back with the fairies."

Lloyd laughed. "Sadly, Alex will never return from the place I sent her." He peeled the treasury jacket off the book and Conner saw the two didn't

belong together. *Alex had been tricked into another story!*

“Where did you send her?” he yelled.

“That doesn’t matter anymore,” Lloyd said. “What matters *now* is where I’m sending the rest of you.”

“I say OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!” the Queen of Hearts shouted.

“I told you, Your Majesty, you can chop as many heads off as you like once we conquer the fairy-tale world,” Lloyd said. “I have something even better planned for these three.”

Lloyd nodded to the Wicked Witch and she tapped her umbrella again. Six flying monkeys swooped down and grabbed Conner, the Tin Woodman, and Peter by the arms. They flew them high into air and the entire villain army roared with delight.

Conner’s uncle removed another book and the blue potion bottle from his lapel pocket. He placed the book on the platform in the center of the courtroom and poured the potion onto it. A beam of light shined straight out of the book and toward the ceiling.

“You’ll never get away with this!” Conner said.

“But I already have,” Lloyd said with a menacing smile. “Throw them in!”

“NOOOOO!” Conner yelled.

The flying monkeys threw Conner, the Tin Woodman, and Peter into the beam and they vanished from the Castle of Hearts. The villain army erupted in applause.

Lloyd stacked the book he had tricked Alex into and the book he threw Conner into on top of their copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. He gave the Wicked Witch another nod. A fiery geyser blasted from the tip of her umbrella and she burned the books until they were nothing but a pile of ashes.

This outraged Captain Hook, and he hooked Lloyd by his collar. “You said *I* would be the one to kill Peter Pan!” he yelled in his face. “*That* was our agreement!”

“James, relax,” Lloyd said. “I’ve simply put him in a place he can’t escape from for the time being. Once you and your men have successfully aided me in conquering my home, I will retrieve the boy for you.”

Captain Hook released him from his hook and Lloyd patted him on the shoulder. Hook wasn’t convinced Lloyd would keep his word, but only time

would tell.

Lloyd stood on top of the platform to address the entire army.

“The time has come!” he shouted. “Now that the children are gone, there will be nothing to protect the kingdoms of my home world! We will return to the ship and set sail at once! Together, we will conquer the fairy-tale world and destroy anything that stands in our way!”

The villains roared in favor. Lloyd looked proudly over the army he had formed. His whole life had led up to this very moment. The boy whose powers had been stripped from him was now standing as the most powerful man in the universe. He had accomplished the impossible, and nothing was going to stop him now.

“But first,” Lloyd said, “to ensure victory, there is another story I’m interested in recruiting from.… We have one more stop to make.”

Chapter Twenty

THE STORYBOOK GRILL

It was after school and instead of spending time with friends like her mother had insisted, Bree was sitting alone in a booth at a diner. She sipped a vanilla milk shake and stared down at the letter written by Cornelia Grimm that she had found in the attic. She hoped by reading it over and over again, she might discover something new that could answer one of the many questions percolating in her mind. Unfortunately, there were no clues or subliminal messages to find.

Bree took a break from overanalyzing the letter and watched the diner's staff around her. There were two waitresses in the diner that afternoon, but only one seemed to be working. She actively waited on the patrons while the other sat at the counter and took notes from a thick textbook.

"Petunia, order's up for table number four," the working one said to the other.

"Rosemary, for the *twentieth time*, I told you I'm studying for my Zoology exam," Petunia said.

"I've got my hands full with tables two and seven," Rosemary said. "Your homework can wait *one* minute!"

Bree knew the waitresses had to be sisters. They spoke to each other exactly like Bree and her sisters did. She looked at the menu and her suspicion was confirmed. In bold letters, the menu clearly said:

STORYBOOK GRILL

A FAMILY ESTABLISHMENT

Naturally, when Bree decided to go for a walk after school and came across the diner, she had to check it out. The diner was filled with cartoonish fairy-tale art and knickknacks but still had a classic 1950s vibe, complete with a jukebox.

"That's one Ogre Burger cooked medium rare, one Beanstalk Salad with

ranch, a Cinderella Club Sandwich on Snow White Bread, three orders of Charming Curly Fries served Goblin Style, the Spinning Wheel Sliders to start, and the Gingerbread House Pie for dessert," Rosemary said, repeating the order for the family at table seven. "Will that be all?"

Bree had never heard of this place before, and to no surprise, she found it very comfortable. She wished she were still in contact with Alex and Conner so she could tell them about it.

"Petunia, seriously?" Rosemary said when she discovered her sister hadn't moved from the counter. "Table four's food is getting cold! No wonder you got fired from the animal hospital!"

"How dare you!" Petunia fired back. "You know perfectly well I left to go back to school!"

An older woman stepped out from the back of the diner. "Girls, stop fighting!" she said. "*I'll* take table four their food." The woman was authoritative but easily annoyed, so Bree assumed she must have been the waitresses' mother.

The mother delivered the food to the table. On her way back, Bree caught her eye. The woman and Bree were instantly drawn to each other, as if they had known each other in a previous lifetime.

"Are you enjoying your Midnight Milk Shake?" the woman asked.

"It's delicious, thank you," Bree said.

"Could I interest you in some Charming Curly Fries or Three Little Pigs in Blankets? On the house," she said.

"No, thank you," Bree said. "I've never seen this place before—is it new?"

"Next month the girls and I will be celebrating our second year of business," the woman said. "I never thought I'd own a restaurant so late in life, but it's kept us busy."

The woman was very easy to talk to. It had been a while since Bree was *engaged* in a conversation.

"Why did you choose a fairy-tale theme?" Bree asked.

"We wanted something that reminded us of home. Fairy tales have a special place in our hearts."

Bree definitely could relate. "I know the feeling."

The woman took the empty seat across from her. "My name is Iris, what's yours?"

“Bree Campbell.” She shook Iris’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Forgive me for being nosy, but what’s that you’re reading?” Iris asked, and pointed to the letter.

“It’s a letter I found that was written to my grandmother a long time ago,” Bree said.

“Oh,” Iris said. “And it’s significant to you?”

“Sort of,” Bree said. “I’ve been thinking a lot about family lately, and it answers some questions that have been on my mind.”

“Every family should have a few good mysteries,” Iris said. “May I take a look?”

Bree slid the letter across the table. Iris put her reading glasses on and read it.

“Beautiful penmanship,” she said. “They certainly don’t teach people to write like *this* anymore.” The sender’s name seemed to intrigue Iris as much as it had Bree. “Cornelia Grimm is a cousin of your grandmother’s?”

“I think so,” Bree said. “My grandma isn’t alive to confirm it, unfortunately.”

“Grimm is an unusual name, isn’t it?” Iris said. “Any relation to the Brothers Grimm, by chance?”

“That’s actually exactly what I’m trying to figure out,” Bree said. “If she’s still alive, I want to find this Cornelia woman and ask her, but my parents would never go for it. Things got a little crazy the last time I went on a trip.”

Iris found this quite curious. “You seem very interested in the possibility. Would a relationship with the Brothers Grimm mean more to you than just a bragging right?” she asked.

Bree didn’t know how to explain it without sounding like a total lunatic.

“It would mean… It would mean…,” she said, struggling to find the right words. “I suppose it would feel like I had a little piece of magic somewhere inside me. It would make me feel like I was part of something bigger than myself—like I was meant for greater things than I realize.”

“I hope you would feel that way regardless of any association,” Iris said.

“It’s more than an association,” Bree said. “It would clarify things, help me understand where I belong, and give me a purpose. I know it sounds crazy, but I’m constantly worried that if I don’t find out, I’ll be tortured by it forever. And living with that fear has started to change me. I’ve become

less interested in school, I ignore my friends, and I'm meaner to my little sisters that I've ever been before. It's like I can't enjoy anything until I figure it out."

She couldn't believe she had just spewed so much information to a stranger. It had been so compressed inside her, it all spilled out the moment she started talking about it.

"I'm sorry." Bree laughed. "I sound like such a teenager—so many emotions, such little time."

Iris understood more than Bree realized. This was about much more than just DNA; Bree was on a delicate road to self-discovery.

"You don't want to spend your life searching for relevance," Iris said. "It will only lead to mistakes. Those mistakes will harden you and make you bitter. You'll start resenting people who have found happiness. You'll spread misery, hoping it will destroy your own, but it won't. If you have a chance to validate something within yourself, then do yourself a favor and take that chance. You don't want to live with a piece of your heart missing—it'll turn you into a monster. It's better to be the hero of your own story than to become the villain of someone else's."

"So you're saying I should find this Cornelia woman?" Bree asked.

"If it'll bring you peace, I recommend you do," Iris said. "Even if you don't get the answers you're looking for, you'll never be poisoned with regret."

Bree understood and agreed with her completely, but being a teenager, there was only so much she could do.

"But she lives all the way in Connecticut," Bree said. "There's no way I could make it there on my own."

Iris raised a mischievous eyebrow. "Where in Connecticut?"

"Willow Grove," Bree said. "Have you heard of it?"

Iris checked the postmark on the envelope. "What a coincidence," she said. "The powdered buns we call Snow White Bread come from a factory in Connecticut. It's not in Willow Grove, but the zip code looks very familiar."

Iris winked at Bree, but she didn't understand what she was getting at.

"The delivery truck will be here next Friday," Iris said. "We're always their last stop of the week before it turns around. The deliveryman is sweet but gets distracted *very* easily. He has a crush on my daughter Petunia."

Bree couldn’t believe it. Was Iris implying what she thought?

“Iris, are you trying to get me to sneak to Connecticut on a delivery truck?” Bree asked, and couldn’t help but smile at the thought.

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about, Ms. Campbell,” Iris said, and stood from the booth. “But I’m going to get you another Midnight Milk Shake while you think about it.”

Chapter Twenty-One

THE WIZARD AND HIS APPRENTICE

Alex braced herself as the words from *A Treasury of Fairy Tales* formed the fairy-tale world around her. She had no idea what part of the fairy-tale world the book would place her in or what kind of mess she might be stepping into, so she was prepared for the worst. She just hoped she could get Peter and the Tin Woodman to the Fairy Council before the villain army did any damage.

An overcast sky appeared above her. Green hills stretched into the horizon and were covered in boulders and stones. There was a forest of thick mossy trees in the distance. The air was salty and Alex could see the ocean nearby beyond a great cliff.

Alex was alone in the area, so she felt safe for the time being, but she had no idea where she was. She knew the landscape of each kingdom by heart, so she was certain she would know exactly where she was the moment she arrived. However, there was nothing about the land she recognized, and the area was an absolute mystery to her.

Mother Goose and Lester also came out of Wonderland fearing the worst. They charged into the scene with their fists and wings raised but quickly relaxed when they saw there was no one to fight. The new environment puzzled them, too, and they looked around the land curiously.

“Where are we?” Mother Goose said.

“I have no idea,” Alex said. “I thought I had been to every part of the fairy-tale world, but I’ve never been to this place before.”

They scanned the area and looked for a clue as they waited for the Tin Woodman and Peter to step out of the beam of light, but neither a clue nor their friends presented themselves.

“That’s strange,” Alex said. “I wonder what’s keeping them.”

She went to the treasury and right as she was about to poke her head

inside the beam of light, it vanished. A moment later the book burst into flames and Alex jumped back from it. In just a few seconds it burned into nothing but a small clump of ash.

“What in the world just happened?” Mother Goose asked.

“They must have destroyed the treasury in Wonderland,” Alex said. “But why would they burn it? The Tin Woodman and Peter were supposed to follow us.”

The twins made their plan so fast, Alex was worried she or her brother may have misheard each other. But there was nothing that could have misled them to destroy the book. They both knew it was the Tin Woodman and Peter’s way into the fairy-tale world, and that the two book characters needed to convince the Fairy Council of their uncle’s approaching army.

Alex gazed at the unfamiliar land surrounding them and a very troubling thought entered her mind. The color drained away from her face. Her knees went weak and she fell to the ground. She was trembling and she felt her heart beat in the pit of her stomach.

“Oh, no,” she gasped.

“Alex, what’s wrong?” Mother Goose asked. “You look like you left a small child at the grocery store.”

“Peter and the Tin Woodman won’t be joining us in the fairy-tale world because *we’re not in the fairy-tale world!*” Alex said. “Mother Goose, we’ve been tricked! Our uncle knew we were following him and conned us into the wrong story!”

Mother Goose turned white and Lester’s head hung so low, it almost touched the ground. They didn’t want to believe it, but it did explain why neither of them recognized where they were.

“How do we get back?” Mother Goose asked.

“We can’t,” Alex said. “The book acts as the entrance and the exit to each story! We’re trapped without it!”

“But Conner and the others must have seen the book get destroyed,” Mother Goose said. “They’ll know we’ve been marooned!”

“Maybe,” Alex said. “Unless something happened to them, too! They could be trapped in another story for all we know!”

Alex broke into tears. She couldn’t believe their journey had taken such a miserable turn. They had been so careful up to this point, and now they were trapped, *possibly forever*.

Mother Goose decided Alex was panicking enough for the both of them. She took a deep breath and tried being positive by playing devil's advocate.

"There's no way of telling what happened to your brother," she said. "But it's very possible he crossed into Neverland safely and we're worrying for nothing. And if he did, once he arrives in the fairy-tale world with the others, it won't take them long to realize something happened to us. Even if he doesn't, I have no doubt someone *will find us*. It may take time, and it may throw off our plan, but I promise you we won't be trapped here forever."

Mother Goose pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dried Alex's tears. Alex gave her a small smile and nodded. "You're right." She sniffled. "This isn't indefinite, it's just a delay."

"Atta girl," Mother Goose said. "Since we're here, why don't we find out what *here* is? I certainly hope there's a tavern somewhere in this story—I'm going to need a drink."

Mother Goose helped Alex to her feet and they journeyed into the land, looking for evidence of what story they were deserted in.

They walked through the forest, but it went on for miles. The trees were ancient and grew into the sky. Their roots were enormous and had completely unleveled the ground, making it difficult to walk over. Unfortunately, the woods were empty and offered nothing to put them at ease.

"Walking isn't doing us any good," Mother Goose said. "Lester, let's see if we can find anything from the sky. Alex, you keep searching the forest. We'll be right back."

She hopped on Lester's back and they flew above the trees and disappeared into the overcast sky.

Alex had a seat on a tree root while she waited. She felt herself slipping into another spiral of despair and tried to fight it off. Being upset about the situation wouldn't solve anything, but staying positive was a real challenge. Thankfully, her doubting was interrupted by a sound coming from the forest—it was footsteps, and they were headed straight toward her.

"Mother Goose?" Alex said. "Is that you?"

The footsteps continued, but there was no sign of Mother Goose or Lester. The steps echoed through the trees, so Alex couldn't tell where they were coming from, but they were definitely getting closer. She got to her

feet and looked around, hoping who or whatever the steps belonged to could help her determine their location.

Alex climbed a steep mound and crashed into a man running the opposite way. They tumbled down the mound and landed on top of each other in a shallow ditch. Alex screamed and they both quickly got to their feet.

The man was tall and muscular. He wore a red shirt, a brown leather vest, and a knight's helmet. He carried a shield and a wooden sword.

"Forgive me, miss," he apologized, and removed his helmet to look her in the eye. "Are you hurt?"

Alex wasn't sure—the man was so attractive, she went completely numb. The man was only a year or two older than she was. He had short sandy blonde hair and blue eyes that Alex immediately became lost in.

"Miss, are you hurt?" he asked again.

"Nahimmaokay," Alex mumbled—it was all she could manage.

"Oh, you don't speak English—DO NOT FEAR, I COME IN PEACE!" he shouted with large gestures.

"Not speaking English doesn't make me hard of hearing," Alex said playfully. Her remark was surprising to herself—she had just met the man and she was already *flirting with him!*

The man smiled at her. "Pretty *and* witty, I see," he said.

Alex started to blush just as a thunderous roar came from the forest. Apparently the man had been running from a creature, and it just caught up with him. Alex was relieved; hopefully the man would just think she was blushing because she was scared.

"Excuse me one moment," the man said, and put his helmet back on.

He climbed out of the ditch and Alex followed him. A massive black bear was standing just a few feet away from them. It raised its claws and bared its teeth. The bear roared again and it was so loud, Alex and the man almost fell back into the ditch.

"I'll handle this, don't worry," the man said.

Alex wasn't worried at all. With just a snap of her fingers she could turn the bear into a harmless poodle if she needed to. The bear charged toward them and the man blocked its paws with his shield. Alex sat by a tree and watched the battle—it was much more amusing than using magic.

"Remember, you must always be one step ahead of your enemy!" said an

airy voice that resonated through the trees. Alex looked around the forest but didn't see who or where it was coming from. Perhaps it was a spirit?

The man seemed to be taking the voice's advice. He used the bear's head as a springboard and jumped into the air. He grabbed hold of a tree branch and pulled himself into the tree.

"A step AHEAD, not step ON their head!" the mysterious voice clarified.

The bear climbed the tree after him. It tore the branches off as it went, making it impossible for the man to climb down.

"When in trouble, use your surroundings as a tool!"

The man climbed to the very top of the tree and the bear followed. The tree bent from their weight. The man waited until the bear was right behind him and then leaped off. The tree flung the bear into the woods like a catapult, and it crashed to the ground a few yards away.

Alex clapped for the man and he gave her a quick bow. The bear was furious and breathed heavily from its flared nostrils. It got to its feet and charged after him.

"Use your opponent's anger against them! Taunt them until they are blind with rage!"

The man zigzagged between the trees and kicked dirt into the bear's eyes as it chased him. The bear was blinded and pawed its eyes to get the dirt out. The man ran toward it, about to strike it with his wooden sword.

"Never be fooled by false injuries!"

The bear suddenly opened its eyes and knocked the man across the woods. He landed by the tree Alex was seated on.

"Are you a knight or something?" Alex asked.

The man pulled himself up to a seated position beside her. "Or something," he said.

"I don't think you're going to win this fight with a wooden sword," Alex said with a cheeky grin. "Do you need a hand?"

"Of course not," the man said, insulted she would even ask. "That bear is exactly where I want him. This isn't the first beast I've slaughtered."

The bear was running straight for them—coming in for the kill.

"But it might be your last," Alex said.

The man pointed his wooden sword at the bear, but it might as well have been a toothpick—the bear ran so fast, nothing was going to stop it.

“Most importantly, never involve innocent people in your dueling—”

The mysterious voice was mysteriously interrupted. Just as the bear was about to pounce on the man and Alex, metal chains wrapped around the bear’s body and pulled it inside a large cage that magically appeared behind it.

The man took off his helmet and stared in amazement. “Are you seeing this, too, or did I hit my head?”

Alex was just as surprised as he was—*her* magic wasn’t trapping the bear. This enchantment was coming from someone *else*. A gust of wind came from above them and they looked up to the sky. Mother Goose and Lester descended into the forest and landed beside the caged bear.

“I leave you alone for five minutes and you almost get clawed to death by a bear?” Mother Goose said.

“I could have handled it if I was worried,” Alex said.

Mother Goose hopped down from Lester’s back. The man quickly got to his feet and looked back and forth between the old woman and the large bird. It wasn’t every day he saw a person flying on the back of a giant goose.

“Lester and I didn’t see anything but more trees from the sky—Hey, who’s the heartthrob?” Mother Goose asked when she noticed the man.

“We haven’t been formally introduced,” Alex said, and turned to him. “I’m Alex. These are my friends Mother Goose and Lester.”

“Pleased to meet you, cutie,” Mother Goose said, and winked at him.

“Pleasure,” the man said with a polite smile. “My name is Arthur, and the bear you just chained up is actually my friend Merlin.”

Alex and Mother Goose weren’t sure they heard him correctly and looked to the other to confirm it. “Did he say *Merlin?*” they asked together.

WHOOSH! A whirlwind of dirt and leaves surrounded the caged bear, and the beast disappeared. An old man with a long silver beard and thick silver eyebrows appeared in its place. He wore glasses, a blue robe, and a matching pointed hat. He stared down at his arms and legs in bewilderment.

“Madam, that was one *brilliant* enchantment!” Merlin said, and applauded Mother Goose. “I’ve never seen someone enchant something so effortlessly!”

Mother Goose batted her eyes. “Well, when you’ve been *enchanting* for as long as I have, you get lots of practice,” she snickered.

Merlin took off his hat, exposing his bald head, and bowed to her. “It is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said, and kissed her hand. “You are a goddess of sorcery!”

Mother Goose blushed at the compliment, even more than Alex had earlier. Lester rolled his eyes and looked away.

Alex couldn’t believe what she was seeing and hearing. Were these really the legendary characters of *King Arthur* standing before her? She had to clarify it before they went any further.

“Hold on a second,” Alex said. “Are you *the* Arthur and Merlin—as in *Camelot?*”

“Shhhh!” Merlin shushed her and quickly covered Arthur’s ears. “The boy doesn’t know about that yet! You’re going to give it away! I’m having a hard enough time keeping him focused on combat lessons—Wait a moment, how do you know about Camelot?”

Alex and Mother Goose went quiet—they didn’t know what to tell him. Merlin was a wizard, after all; he might understand the truth if they gave it to him. Arthur looked at Alex and Mother Goose with a curious smile.

“Can you predict the future like Merlin?” he asked.

“Come again?” Mother Goose asked.

“Merlin is training me to be the next King of England,” Arthur explained. “He says he’s certain I’ll be the king in the future because he’s prophesized it. Although, I’ve never met anyone *else* who believes it.”

“Well, he’s right,” Alex said, and received a dirty look from the wizard. “Sorry, Merlin! I didn’t mean to give anything away.”

Arthur’s eyes lit up. “So it’s true,” he said. “I really am going to be king! You must be wizards, too!”

“Technically, I’m a fairy,” Alex said. “And Mother Goose is—well—I’m not sure what to call her.”

“Experienced,” Mother Goose said. “I’ve never been into labels—and I don’t want to burst your bubble, Artie, but we can’t predict the future. People are just very *knowledgeable* where we come from.”

“We’re practically from a different world,” Alex said with nervous laughter.

“Avalon?” Merlin asked.

“No, we’re *literally* from a different world,” Mother Goose said.

“Oh, *France!*” Merlin said, and nodded confidently.

Alex and Mother Goose sighed—perhaps Merlin wouldn't understand after all.

"We're from a different *dimension*," Alex said, giving it one last try. "I know it's hard to believe, but we're trapped in this world until someone figures out where we are and rescues us."

Merlin and Arthur shared the same fascinated look—the kind of expression Alex was used to people making once they understood.

"And what dimension might that be?" Merlin asked.

"Wait—you believe me? You don't think I sound totally insane?" she asked.

"You don't sound mad at all," Arthur said. "Merlin has always said the universe is far more complex than we realize, and you're proving it. What do you call your dimension?"

"Well, there are two, actually," Alex explained. "There's the Otherworld, and there's the fairy-tale world. I suppose we're from both—but I should probably stop while I'm ahead. It's a long and complicated story."

Alex was worried for nothing; the wizard and his apprentice seemed very excited by what she was telling them. Meeting Alex and Mother Goose was the most thrilling thing that had happened to them in a while.

"You both must join us for tea, and I won't take no for an answer," Merlin said. "We want to hear everything about your world, or *worlds*, and how you found your way into ours."

Alex and Mother Goose didn't have a reason to object. Being stranded meant their schedule was clear, and they had never had tea with a wizard before. Merlin offered Mother Goose his arm and she linked it with her own. Arthur offered Alex his arm, too, and the men escorted the women (and Lester) through the woods to Merlin's home.

Merlin lived in a modest cottage a few miles farther into the forest. When Alex and Mother Goose walked through the front door, they couldn't tell which part of the house they were entering; every surface and piece of furniture was covered. There were potions, plants, cauldrons, candles, and thousands of books stacked to the ceiling.

There was everything you'd expect to find in a wizard's home, but there

were also stacks of sketches of very familiar machines and contraptions. Alex recognized a spinning jenny, a sewing machine, a typewriter, and a record player. She could have sworn she even saw a drawing that looked like a cell phone in his collection, but didn't want to seem nosy. Clearly, they were objects Merlin had seen in his visions of the future.

"Merlin, you're a hoarder," Mother Goose said.

"Forgive the mess," he said. "It's been a couple centuries since I had guests."

Merlin snapped his fingers. A broom, a mop, and a bucket leaning in the corner came to life and began cleaning the cottage around them. He cleared a space engulfed in books and revealed a table buried beneath. They had a seat and Arthur poured them each a cup of tea. He made a bucket of vegetables for Lester, who waited outside—the giant gander was too big to fit inside the cottage.

"Now, tell us about the Otherworld and the fairy-tale world, and don't be shy about the details," Merlin said.

At first, Alex and Mother Goose were very vague in their explanations. They told them all about the fairy-tale world and how the late Fairy Godmother had discovered the Otherworld. Mother Goose told them how she and the other fairies spread the stories of their world around the Otherworld to give the children something to believe in. Alex explained how she and her brother discovered the fairy-tale world by accidentally traveling through their grandmother's storybook.

However, explaining how they entered the world of *King Arthur* was difficult without details, and the specifics started to spill out. Alex told them how she and her brother defeated the Enchantress and the Grande Armée the following year, and how they formed the Happily Forever After Assembly. She told them they recently discovered that a criminal called the Masked Man was actually their secret uncle and how he stole the Portal Potion from the Fairy Palace.

Alex told them that she had been the Fairy Godmother until she was *ungodmothered* by the Fairy Council, when they refused to believe that her uncle was a threat to the kingdoms. Mother Goose filled them in on their travels as they followed Lloyd from story to story and tried stopping him from recruiting an army of literary villains, only to end up stranded.

Merlin and Arthur were a great audience. Alex and Mother Goose talked

for hours and hours without any interruption. Arthur's eyes were glued on Alex as if she had cast a spell on him. He was fascinated by every word she said.

"It's astonishing, absolutely astonishing," Merlin said, and stroked his silver beard. "To think, this world exists in others as *a fable*. It endorses my theory that *we are all but characters in the books of God's library.* Or perhaps someone else said that and I'm forgetting who. The best part about predicting the future: I'll always say it first."

Mother Goose looked around at all the things Merlin had collected throughout the centuries. A framed sketch on the wall caught her attention.

"Merlin, is that a sketch of *a flying machine*?" she asked.

Merlin had forgotten the sketch was there and left the table to get a better look. "It appears so," he said. "Is it familiar to you?"

"A friend of mine designed one just like that in the fifteenth century," Mother Goose said. "He lived in Italy and was named Leonardo da Vinci. Did you see him in a vision?"

"Madam, I can barely keep the names straight of people living in *this century*," Merlin said. "You can't expect me to remember the names of people from the *fifteenth century*."

Mother Goose giggled like a schoolgirl. Alex had never seen someone amuse her so much. Merlin sat back down but scooted his chair much closer to Mother Goose than it was before.

"Perhaps this world is just the past of your world," he said. "Let's take it century by century. Give me the names of your friends and I'll give you the names of people I've predicted. It'll be good fun!"

"Oh, Merlin, I knew so many people, we could be playing this game for days!" Mother Goose laughed.

"Terrific! It'll entertain us while we wait for someone to rescue you," he said.

Watching Mother Goose and Merlin journey down memory lane made Arthur and Alex feel like two third wheels.

"Can I interest you in a walk?" Arthur whispered to her.

"Sure," Alex said with a smile.

Arthur and Alex left Merlin's cottage and took a stroll through a part of the woods she hadn't seen. It was a more pleasant area, with younger trees and a much smoother ground. The sun had set while they were in the

cottage and the moon was their only source of light. Alex might have found it romantic if she hadn't been thinking about so many other things.

"I'm glad to know a little more about you know, seeing as how you already know everything about me." Arthur laughed. "Your worlds sound incredible. I can't believe how much you've accomplished at such a young age. It's very inspiring."

"I have wonderful friends who've helped me," Alex said. "You're very inspiring yourself, and a bit of a legend."

Arthur chuckled. "Am I? Do tell."

"Oh no, I did it again!" she said. "You'd better be cautious around me—I'll spoil your destiny if you're not careful."

"Oh, I will," Arthur said, and shrugged like he didn't care, but he wasn't convincing. "If there's one thing I absolutely *don't* want to hear about, it's my future. I want to be totally surprised. Knowing I'll be the King of England is enough—but you're positive that happens?"

"Yes, you become king," she said. "But that's all I'm going to tell you, so don't ask me any more! Besides, you already knew that."

"Indeed," Arthur said. "*But*… no one has said I'll be a *good* king. It would be a relief to know I don't go mad or bad before the end."

Alex sighed, but with a smile. She knew Arthur was prying information out of her just to tease her, but two could play *this* game.

"You're a *good* king, don't worry," she said, and then looked sadly to the ground. "At least you are once you heal from… *the incident.*"

"What *incident*?" Arthur asked.

Alex shook her head somberly. "Well, if Merlin hasn't told you, then I probably shouldn't."

"Oh, right—*the incident*," he said, pretending to know. "Old Merlin's told me about that plenty of times."

"Good," Alex said. "So you know all about *the leeches.*"

Arthur gulped. "Yes… I do," he said nervously.

"Luckily by then you've already been captured by the Saxons and your legs have been ripped off," Alex said. "So there aren't *too* many leech wounds."

Arthur gulped. "It's the definition of *luck*," he said.

"It's a shame you lose both your arms in the battle before you get captured," Alex said. "But you aren't known as *Arthur the Limbless* for

nothing.”

“Arthur the Limbless?”

“Oh, yes,” Alex said. “A lesser king would have let the title belittle him, but you still manage to instill fear in all your enemies. Then again, that could be because of your future wife, Queen Girtha. Of course, Merlin has told you about her.…”

“Naturally,” Arthur said. “She’s that nasty woman, right? So hideous, people are afraid to look at her. Now remind me, how many terrible children do we have?”

“Just the one,” Alex said. “And who would have expected *you* to die during childbirth?”

“*I* die in childbirth?” Arthur asked with a quiver in his voice. “How is that possible?”

“Isn’t that obvious?” Alex asked. “That’s why they call your wife *Girtha the Strong Handed.* Did you never make that connection?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Arthur said. “I made that connection once before, but I forgot about it.”

“I don’t blame you,” Alex said. “I would have blocked it out of my mind, too.”

Arthur stopped walking for a moment while he thought it all over.

“Wait a second, if I’m *limbless* when I become king, how do I manage to pull *that* out?” he asked, and pointed into the trees ahead.

Alex turned to see what he was talking about and saw a grassy clearing in the forest ahead. In the middle of the clearing was a stack of rocks covered in ivy, and a large boulder in the center had been stabbed with a bright sword.

Alex covered her mouth. “It’s *the sword in the stone*!” she gasped.

Arthur was very amused by her excitement. “I thought you’d like to see it.”

“You knew I was fibbing this whole time, didn’t you?” Alex asked.

“Since the leeches,” Arthur said with a guilty smile. “But you were very convincing, don’t get me wrong.”

Alex playfully punched his shoulder and went into the clearing. She walked around the sword in the stone and admired its magnificence. She could practically feel the splendor radiating from it. It had a blue handle and a bright silver blade. There was a square plaque on the rock that read:

HE WHO REMOVETH THIS SWORD FROM THIS STONE

SHALL REVEALETH HIMSELF THE TRUE KING OF ENGLAND.

“Do you want to give it a try?” Arthur asked.

“What? You want *me* to try pulling the sword out of the stone?” she asked, pointing to herself.

“Why not? People travel from all over the world to give it a try,” Arthur said. “Who knows, maybe it’s *your* true fate to be the next King of England.”

“I doubt that, but if it pleases you, I’ll give it a go,” she said.

Alex stood on the rocks behind the sword and wrapped her hands around the handle. As she connected with one of the most important objects in mythical history, she felt a spur of energy move through her body. She bent her elbows and tightened her grip, preparing to give the sword a strong tug.

“BOO!” Arthur yelled inches away from her ear.

“AHHHHH!” Alex screamed. *“What’s wrong with you? I could have had a heart attack!”*

Arthur laughed so hard, he fell to the ground. He looked up at her fuming face and only laughed harder.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it!” He laughed. “You should have seen the look on your face!”

Alex was furious. She wanted to take the sword out of the stone and make *Arthur the Limbless* become a reality. However, with every passing second the scare faded away and the humor set in. Alex fought the giggles growing inside, but once they surfaced, there was no turning back. She held her stomach and laughed until tears filled her eyes. It felt so good—she couldn’t remember the last time she laughed so hard or cried from joy.

“Do you forgive me?” Arthur said.

“I suppose I had it coming,” she said. “You should give it a try next. Maybe tonight’s the night you’re supposed to become king.”

Arthur’s smile faded and he shook his head. “I know it won’t budge. It’ll

happen when I’m ready to be king, but I’m not ready yet. I’ll feel it inside before I even touch the sword.”

For the first time since Alex arrived, the *once and future king* seemed a little sad.

“Arthur, what’s wrong?” she asked. “Are you afraid you’ll never be ready?”

At first Arthur shrugged it off, but Alex looked at him with so much compassion, he felt like she might understand. She was the first person he had ever known who made him want to confess his feelings rather than suppress them.

“I suppose I’m just worried I’ll disappoint people,” Arthur admitted. “Merlin says I’m going to be a legendary king—I just wish I was confident enough to agree. And now that I know the legend of my reign stretches into other dimensions, it seems impossible that I’ll ever live up to those expectations, or worse—”

“The expectations you put on yourself?” Alex said, finishing his sentence.

Arthur went quiet and nodded. “You too?”

“My legacy isn’t written in the stars like yours, but when I first became the Fairy Godmother I almost drowned in the expectations other people put on me,” Alex said. “I wanted to believe in myself as much as the rest of the world did, so I put so much pressure on myself; I became harshly disappointed every time I made a simple mistake. I felt like I would disappoint the world if I was ever exposed as—”

“Human,” Arthur said, finishing her sentence this time.

“Yes,” Alex said. “My biggest fear was disappointing someone, and then after one moment of weakness I ended up disappointing the entire fairy-tale world. I went from being the most beloved person in the Happily Forever After Assembly, to the most feared and hated. But rather than fighting the world that discarded me, I chose to continue saving it. So maybe greatness isn’t about being immortal, or glorious, or popular—it’s about choosing to fight for the greater good of the world, even when the world’s turned its back on you.”

Arthur looked into her eyes like no one had before. They shared a special kinship, an understanding, and an outlook on life unlike anyone else they had connected with, and possibly ever would.

“I don’t know what forces brought you into this world, but I am so grateful they did,” Arthur said.

“Me too,” Alex said. “It’s nice to know I’m not as alone as I thought.”

“Let’s make a pact,” Arthur said. “We’ll both continue living lives of *true greatness*, despite how we’re remembered in the end.”

“Deal,” Alex said.

They shook hands and exchanged warm smiles. The energy Alex felt from the sword in the stone was nothing compared to the touch of Arthur’s hand. They remained hand in hand for a few moments, and separated just before the handshake could turn into anything else.

“We should head back to Merlin’s cottage before it gets too late,” Arthur said.

They broke eye contact and both put their hands in their pockets. Alex felt something strange in her pocket—a paper she had completely forgotten about. She pulled it out of her dress and unfolded it. Her entire face lit up with excitement.

“Oh my gosh,” Alex said. “This is a page from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*!”

“Isn’t that one of the stories you traveled into?” Arthur asked.

“Yes—my brother and I collected the loose pages that fell out before we went inside,” she said. “I think I can use this page to get back to Oz and then travel back home!”

“Don’t you need the Portal Potion to do that?”

“I know the recipe—I can make the potion,” Alex said. “And if my brother has the other pages, that means he can travel back into Oz, too! I’ve got to tell Mother Goose!”

Arthur and Alex excitedly ran back through the woods to Merlin’s cottage to tell him and Mother Goose the good news. By the time they arrived, Merlin and Mother Goose were three-quarters deep into a large bottle of ale and she was still reminiscing through the centuries.

“I had a fling, with Emperor Constantine—but only one date, with Alexander the Great,” Mother Goose said with a hiccup. *“The world gets it wrong, about Genghis Khan—the world’s biggest pain, is that jerk Charlemagne.”*

“I don’t know why you’re rhyming, but it sure is fun,” Merlin said and hiccupped himself.

They jumped when Alex and Arthur rushed through the door.

“Mother Goose, I have wonderful news!” Alex said, and showed her the paper she’d found in her pocket. “It’s a page from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*! We can use it to go into Oz and then back to the fairy-tale world!”

Mother Goose was so excited, she went into a fit of hysterical hiccups and couldn’t speak.

“Wouldn’t you need the Portal Potion to do it?” Merlin asked.

“Yes, but we can make it here,” Alex said. “The ingredients are very simple. We need a branch from the oldest tree in the woods, a feather from the finest pheasant in the sky, a liquefied lock and key from a loved one, two weeks of moonlight, and a zap of magic.”

Mother Goose had an idea. She pointed her finger and opened her mouth to share it with them, but only a hiccup came out. Instead of explaining, she decided to just do it herself. She stood from the table and went outside. They heard Lester squawk loudly outside and Mother Goose returned with a handful of his white feathers.

“*Have your pick of a feather; there’s no finer pheasant than Lester*—HIC!” Mother Goose said.

Alex chose a particularly long feather. “Great! One down, four to go!”

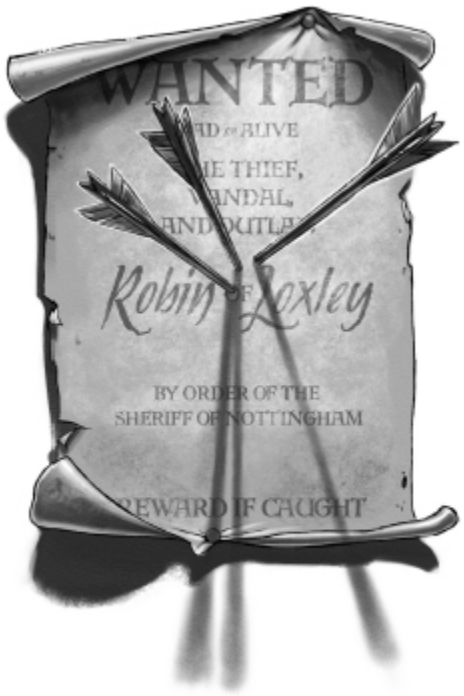
“That certainly seems doable!” Merlin said. “Arthur, as part of your training, I insist you help the lovely young lady collect the ingredients she needs for the potion. In the meantime, I will entertain Mother Goose.”

“It’ll be my honor,” Arthur said. “I’d like to spend as much time with you as possible before you leave.”

He winked at her and she smiled from ear to ear.

“Likewise,” Alex said.

She was so thrilled by the discovery of the page, she hadn’t realized until now that their time together was limited—and she was very surprised how sad it made her. Alex spent the entire day worrying how she would escape the world of *King Arthur*. She never imagined she would end the day with the future king himself, or that he might be someone worth staying for.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Robin of Loxley
BY ORDER OF THE
SHERIFF OF NOTTINGHAM
REWARD IF CAUGHT

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE MERRY MEN OF SHERWOOD FOREST

Once Conner, the Tin Woodman, and Peter were thrown into the book, it didn't take long for the words of the story to form a world around them. A word stretched beneath Conner's feet. Before he had time to read it, the word turned into liquid and Conner sank into a large body of water.

A strong force pushed him deeper and deeper into the water. He was so discombobulated, he didn't know which way the surface was, or if there was even a surface to be found. He stretched his arms and legs out as far as he could to find something to grab—but he was alone in this world of water. Conner was drowning in the ocean of a literary world.

Just as Conner was fearing the end was near, he felt a hard hand grab the back of his shirt and lift him upward. The next thing he knew, he was lying on a wooden floor. He rolled to his back and saw the Tin Woodman and Peter looking down at him.

"Conner, are you all right?" the Tin Woodman asked. "You landed in the stream and had quite a fit."

"I was afraid I landed in the ocean of *Moby-Dick* or *The Swiss Family Robinson*," he said.

"It's not even that deep," Peter said. "You must be a terrible swimmer."

Conner sat up and looked around. He and his friends were on a narrow bridge over a shallow stream. They were in the middle of a forest with tall and thin trees, but there was nothing unique enough to help him recognize which forest it was.

"Does this place look familiar?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"No," Conner said. "Quick, we need to find the book! It's got to be here somewhere!"

They spread out and searched the woods.

“Conner! I found it!” Peter said. He pointed to a green book floating down the stream.

“After that book!” Conner shouted.

He dove into the stream and swam after it. Peter flew above the water and tried to grab it, but the stream’s current picked up and sloshed it around. Just as they both narrowed in on it, the book burst into flames, even though it was soaked and surrounded by water. It burned into ashes and the stream washed them away.

Conner felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. His uncle must have destroyed it in Wonderland. They were trapped!

“What happened?” the Tin Woodman asked. He watched them from the bank, where it was dry.

“The book’s gone,” Conner said, and shook his head. “We’re stuck here. And that means my sister and Mother Goose are probably stuck wherever they are, too. We’ll never get to the kingdoms in time to warn them—they’ll never have time to prepare for the army coming!”

Conner crawled out of the stream, sat on the ground, and covered his face with his hands. The Tin Woodman lowered his head and placed a hand over where his heart should be.

“Don’t worry, lads!” Peter said. “The Lost Boys will come for us!”

“They’re in a different dimension, Peter!” Conner snapped. “How do you expect them to rescue us?”

“How do you expect them to rescue us?” Peter mocked him.

“This is serious, Peter!” Conner yelled. “We might be trapped here forever!”

“We might be trapped here… wait, *forever?”* Peter said. The reality of the situation hit him and he descended to the ground. “So I may never see Neverland or the Lost Boys again?”

Conner sighed. “I’m afraid so.”

Peter sat on the ground with his legs spread out in front of him. His mouth fell open and his eyes filled with tears.

“There must be *something* we can do,” the Tin Woodman said.

“I suppose the best thing to do is figure out where we are,” Conner said. “Hopefully we’ll find someone who can help us.”

They journeyed deeper into the forest but found nothing for miles. Peter flew into the sky for a better view and saw a large stone structure in the

distance. They figured it was their best option for the time being and headed toward it. Along the way they spotted a long piece of parchment pinned to a tree. It read:

WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE

THE THIEF, VANDAL, AND OUTLAW

ROBIN OF LOXLEY

BY ORDER OF THE SHERIFF OF NOTTINGHAM

REWARD IF CAUGHT

Conner read the poster a few times just to make sure he wasn't imagining it. Of all the places to be stranded, he figured it could have been much worse.

"Guys, we're in *Robin Hood*," Conner said.

The Tin Woodman and Peter were excited to hear it, but their smiles quickly faded.

"Who?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"Is that Red Riding Hood's brother?" Peter asked.

"No, but this is good news!" Conner said. "Robin Hood is a hero—if anyone can help us in this world, it'll be him! We've got to find him!"

The Tin Woodman and Peter eyed the poster suspiciously.

"If he's a hero, why is he wanted by the Sheriff of such and such?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"The Sheriff of Nottingham is the bad guy in this story," Conner explained. "Robin Hood steals from the rich and gives to the poor—he's the guy we want to find."

"I say we capture Robin Hood and turn him in for the reward," Peter said. "Surely being rich would help us more than a criminal can."

“I think the boy has a point,” the Tin Woodman said.

On the spot, the Tin Woodman and Peter began making plans to capture the outlaw. They ignored Conner, who frantically shook his head at the idea.

“Guys!” Conner said. “We are not going to kidnap or kill Robin Hood!”

FEEESHT! An arrow came out of nowhere and pinned Conner to the tree. He screamed in agony but stopped once he realized the arrow was stabbing through his sleeve and not his arm. *FEEESHT!* Two arrows pinned both sides of Peter’s pants to the tree beside Conner. *FEEESHT!*

“INDIANS!” Peter screamed.

“There are no Indians in Sherwood Forest!” Conner said. “Besides, the correct term is *Native Americans!*”

FEEESHT! An arrow hit the Tin Woodman’s back, but it broke on impact. *FEESHT!* A bundle of arrows pelted the Tin Woodman. *FEEESHT!* The arrows only bounced off his metal body. *FEEESHT!* The Tin Woodman retrieved his axe and sliced the oncoming arrows in midair.

“THE KNIGHT IS IMPENETRABLE!” a voice called from somewhere in the treetops. “MERRY MEN, ATTACK!”

Before they knew it, four men and five horses charged through the forest. The men jumped off their horses and circled Conner, Peter, and the Tin Woodman with their weapons raised.

One of the men was enormous, standing seven feet tall at least, and he held a long staff. A rather flamboyant man, who wore clothes made of red silk and a large feathered hat, held a sword in each hand. A short and plump padre was among the men and held a crucifix and a Bible like a sword and shield. There was also a thin musician, who didn’t have a weapon, either, but he strummed chords on a mandolin threateningly while giving the boys a nasty look.

“Well, look what we have here,” the large man said in his gruff voice.

“The sheriff must be getting desperate if he’s only sent one knight and two children into the woods,” the man in silk said, and then tossed his hair.

“Oh, heavenly Father, what kind of coward sends children to do his sinful work?” the padre said, and shook his head.

Conner almost didn’t recognize the men circling them. They were much more weathered and aggressive than he was expecting.

“PIRATES!” Peter yelled.

“There are no pirates in Sherwood Forest, either!” Conner said. “These

are the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest—they work with Robin Hood!”

“Looks like they found us before we could find them,” the Tin Woodman said, completely distrustful of the men around him. “Which one is Robin Hood?”

“DID YOU HEAR THAT, MEN? THE KNIGHT HAS REQUESTED AN AUDIENCE WITH ME!” shouted the voice from above.

A man suddenly dropped down from the treetops and landed on his feet. He was tall and handsome with a red beard and a bright smile. He wore dark green clothing, a feathered cap, and tall boots. He held a bow in one hand, and a quiver of arrows was strapped to his back.

“Robin Hood!” Conner said excitedly. “We were just talking about you __”

“AND PLOTTING MY ARREST, OR SO I OVERHEARD,” Robin Hood said. “BUT THERE SHALL BE NO VICTORY FOR YOU TODAY, KNIGHT. YOU ARE NO MATCH FOR THE GREAT ROBIN HOOD AND HIS MERRY MEN!”

Robin Hood rarely made eye contact as he talked, and he spoke as if there were a large audience around him at all times. Conner was very disappointed; the legendary prince of thieves was not the compassionate hero he grew up believing in, but rather a boisterous narcissist who praised himself in the third person.

“Time-out!” Conner said. “First off, you don’t have to shout—we’re *right here*. Second, this is all a big misunderstanding—”

“DO NOT SPEAK, CHILD ACCOMPLICE!” Robin Hood commanded. “SHAME ON YOU FOR ALLOWING THE SHERIFF OF NOTTINGHAM TO USE YOUR INNOCENCE AS A PLOY FOR HIS WRONGDOING. MY QUARREL IS WITH THE KNIGHT STANDING BEFORE ME, WHOM THE SHERIFF SENT TO CAPTURE AND POTENTIALLY KILL ME.”

Robin Hood glared at the Tin Woodman. The Tin Woodman glanced behind himself to make sure he wasn’t referring to someone else.

“Me?” he asked softly. “But I’m not a knight.”

“DO NOT LIE TO ME, KNIGHT!” Robin Hood warned. “ONLY A MAN WORKING FOR THE SHERIFF WEARS ARMOR SUCH AS YOURS! YOU CANNOT FOOL ME! DO NOT INSULT YOUR INTELLIGENCE BY TESTING MINE!”

“Oh, I’m not wearing armor,” the Tin Woodman said. “You see, where I come from, there was a witch who cast a spell on my axe—”

“DO NOT FILL MY HEAD WITH TALES OF WITCHCRAFT,” Robin Hood ordered. “YOU MUST RETURN TO THE SHERIFF AND TELL HIM ROBIN HOOD IS INSULTED BY THIS ATTEMPT TO SEIZE ME! GO NOW, AND I SHALL SPARE YOUR LIFE!”

The Merry Men cheered and the musician played a chord on his mandolin. The Tin Woodman stayed put and eyed the men confoundedly.

“THE KNIGHT LINGERS!” Robin Hood said.

“Sorry, but where am I supposed to go?” the Tin Woodman said. “I told you I’m not a knight—I have no idea where to find the sheriff.”

Robin Hood stared at him and stroked his beard. Clearly he was not a knight, but Robin Hood was too cocky to believe he was mistaken, so he had to think of another reason why the Tin Woodman was showing resistance.

“THE KNIGHT IS SO OVERWHELMED BY MY PRESENCE, HE IS *CONFUSED*,” Robin Hood told his Merry Men. “LITTLE JOHN, WILL SCARLET—ROUND THEM UP! WE’LL TAKE THE KNIGHT AND CHILDREN BACK TO OUR CAMP UNTIL THEY REGAIN CONTROL OF THEIR SENSES!”

The Merry Men removed Conner and Peter from the tree and tied their hands and the Tin Woodman’s hands together. Robin Hood and the Merry Men climbed on their horses and set off deeper into the woods, pulling their captives behind them.

“Some hero,” Peter said under his breath.

“This man is a lunatic,” the Tin Woodman said.

“You guys were right,” Conner said. “We definitely should have captured him and turned him in for money.”

“ALAN-A-DALE, MY FAITHFUL MINSTREL,” Robin Hood called to the musician. “PLAY US A CHEERFUL TUNE OF MY COURAGE AND GLORY, TO PASS THE TIME AS WE VENTURE HOME.”

The musician played a song on his mandolin and sang along.

“Robin of Loxley, Robin of Loxley,
England’s most treasured man.

He takes delight, in leading the fight,
To save good Nottingham.

“Unlike the sheriff, Robin is cherished,
His heart is pure and true.
Loved by the ladies, they want his babies,
And love his merry crew.

“The sheriff grows scared as Robin prepares,
To end Prince John’s regime.
If you want freedom, a better kingdom,
Then sing this merry theme!

“Robin of Loxley, Robin of Loxley,
’Tis no one greater than,
Robin of Loxley, Robin of Loxley,
England’s most treasured man!”

The Merry Men sang the song over and over again as Robin Hood played conductor, irritating Conner, Peter, and the Tin Woodman to no end. By nightfall they had arrived at the camp, which consisted of half a dozen tents around a small campfire. The Merry Men pulled their captives into a tent and tied them to a pole inside.

The singing continued outside once the Merry Men gathered around the campfire, forcing Conner, Peter, and the Tin Woodman to endure several more hours of terrible lyrics praising a terrible man.

“This is going to drive me insane—and I live on a desert island in outer space with little boys! I’ve got patience by the ton!” Peter said, and shoved Conner, as if he could do something to solve the matter.

“I don’t know why you’re shoving me, leaf boy!” Conner said, and pushed him back.

“Because we wouldn’t be here if you and your sister hadn’t lost control of your uncle!” Peter said.

“Maybe if your friend didn’t have a pixie-sized brain, she wouldn’t have gotten kidnapped!” Conner said.

With every remark, they shoved each other a little harder.

“Gentlemen, keep fighting!” the Tin Woodman said.

“Why?” Conner asked.

“Because the harder you shove each other, the looser the ropes around my hands become,” he said.

Conner and Peter shared an excited look and took turns knocking into each other as hard as they could. They were so desperate to get away from the Merry Men, they didn’t notice how much it hurt their shoulders. After a few moments the Tin Woodman was able to pull his hands free from the rope and he untied the boys.

“Conner, there’s something sticking out of your pocket,” Peter said.

Conner patted his pants and felt a piece of paper coming out of his back pocket. Knocking back and forth into Peter must have pushed it up. He unfolded it and his eyes grew twice their size when he discovered what it was.

“Guys, it’s a page from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*!” he exclaimed. “We can use it to get back to Oz, and then get back to the fairy-tale world!”

“Don’t we need a potion to do that?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“We’ll make the potion! I have the recipe memorized!” he said.

Conner was beaming with joy. When he had stuffed the page into his pocket back in the cave, he never imagined it would later act as a lifeboat. And even better, Conner remembered his sister had one, too—he knew it was only a matter of time before Alex found it and used it to escape wherever she was, if she hadn’t already.

His celebration was cut short when they heard a fearful sound coming from outside. It wasn’t another song, but horses—*hundreds of them!*

Conner, Peter, and the Tin Woodman peeked out of the tent and saw a fleet of soldiers emerge from Sherwood Forest and surround the Merry Men’s camp. They arrived so suddenly, Robin Hood and his men didn’t have time to retrieve their weapons. A middle-aged man with a dark beard led the soldiers and he wore a bright star over his armor.

“Uh-oh,” Conner said.

“Who is that?” Peter asked.

“LOOK, MEN, THE SHERIFF OF NOTTINGHAM HAS COME TO PAY US A VISIT,” Robin Hood said, answering the question. “TO WHAT DO WE OWE THIS *DISHONOR*?”

“Robin of Loxley,” the sheriff addressed, “you and your men are under arrest for thievery, vandalism, and running from the law. You will come with us to Nottingham, where you will await trail. Any attempt of escape will result in death.”

The sheriff nodded to his soldiers. The archers stepped forward and aimed their bows at Robin Hood and the Merry Men. There didn’t appear to be any possible escape.

“This is terrible,” Conner whispered.

“Why? The man’s a nightmare,” Peter said.

“No, it’s terrible for us!” Conner said. “The sheriff is going to find us and take us back to Nottingham with them.”

“But we were captured, we’re not associated with them,” the Tin Woodman said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Conner said. “I know the sheriff seems more tolerable than Robin Hood, but he’s a seriously bad dude. He’ll take us back to the castle and torture us for sport!”

Peter and the Tin Woodman eyed each other nervously. Conner paced around the tent, thinking of some way they could escape. All they had in the tent was a raggedy blanket and a white sheet bundled up on the ground.

“So, what do we do?” Peter asked.

“I’ve got an idea,” Conner said. “It’s crazy, but it just might work. Just go along with whatever I say.”

Outside, things were becoming increasingly tense. Robin Hood left the campfire and approached the Sheriff of Nottingham.

“YOU ARE VERY CLEVER, SHERIFF,” Robin Hood said. “YOU PLANNED FOR ME TO CAPTURE ONE OF YOUR KNIGHTS EARLIER SO YOU COULD FOLLOW HIM BACK TO OUR CAMP. WELL PLAYED!”

“You imbecile,” the sheriff said. “We found you because your voice carries for miles.”

All the Merry Men slumped—they knew their leader’s volume would get them into trouble eventually.

“DO YOU KNOW WHAT ELSE CARRIES THROUGH THE FOREST, SHERIFF?” Robin Hood asked. “*MY LOVE OF NOTTINGHAM!* SO TAKE ME AWAY, BEAT ME, TORTURE ME, AND KILL ME IN THE END. YOU MAY RENDER MY BODY LIFELESS, BUT YOU

WILL NEVER DESTROY MY—”

“Spirit!” Little John screamed.

“YES, THAT’S WHAT I WAS ABOUT TO SAY!”

“No, sir! Look, there’s something ghostly coming this way!” Will Scarlet said.

The Merry Men and the Nottingham soldiers all turned to the center of camp. Conner had covered himself in the raggedy blanket. He was hunched over and he limped toward them with his arms extended like a zombie.

“Who is this?” the sheriff asked. “Declare yourself at once or I will have an arrow shot through your heart.”

Conner gulped—he hoped this would work.

“I do not fear your arrows, for I cannot be killed!” he said in a ghoulish voice. “I am Connermoondo, the feared sorcerer of Sherwood!”

“SORCERER?” Robin Hood laughed. “THIS BOY IS A MERE CHILD WE FOUND IN THE FOREST.”

“SILENCE!” Conner yelled at Robin Hood. *“You are blinded by arrogance and were easily fooled by my mortal disguise! I come before you now to offer the sheriff and his men a warning! Leave my forest at once, or I shall sic my army of the dead upon you!”*

The sheriff and his soldiers laughed uproariously. Conner wasn’t fooling anyone.

“This boy must learn what happens to people who threaten us,” the sheriff said. *“Shoot him!”*

“Now!” Conner whispered.

As the archers aimed their arrows at him, the Tin Woodman ran out from the tent—*but without his head!* The Merry Men and the soldiers screamed at the terrifying sight—for all they knew, he was a headless man back from the dead. The Tin Woodman ran toward the soldiers, and many of them retreated into the woods.

“Peter, you’re next!” Conner whispered.

Peter shot out of the tent wrapped in the white sheet. He flew above the camp and moaned in agony like a tortured spirit. The Merry Men held one another and screamed—the padre said a prayer and held his crucifix up to the hovering spirit.

“These forests have been conquered by black magic!” the sheriff shouted. *“Forget about Robin of Loxley and his Merry Men—we must*

return to Nottingham at once!”

The sheriff whipped the reins of his horse and retreated into the woods. The few remaining soldiers followed him—many of them ripping off their armor as they hurried away, to run faster.

When the coast was clear of soldiers, Conner took off the raggedy blanket, Peter threw off the sheet, and the Tin Woodman retrieved his head from the tent and screwed it back on like a bottle cap. They burst into hysterical laughter and gave one another high fives.

“Did you see the look on their faces!” Conner asked.

“We petrified them!” Peter said.

“I would have never thought to take off my head,” the Tin Woodman said. “Good idea, Conner!”

The Merry Men were trembling and still clutched one another. Robin Hood approached Conner and his friends, despite his men’s pleas to stay away. He looked them in the eyes and bowed.

“OH, GREAT SORCERER OF SHERWOOD FOREST,” Robin Hood said, “YOU HAVE SAVED MY MERRY MEN AND ME FROM THE GALLOWS! WE ARE ETERNALLY GRATEFUL AND SHALL SPEND THE REST OF OUR DAYS AS YOUR HUMBLE SERVANTS!”

The Merry Men followed his example and bowed, too. The Tin Woodman and Peter grinned and nudged Conner forward. At first he thought about telling Robin Hood and his men the truth about who he was and how he and his friends had come to Sherwood Forest. On second thought, he was afraid the truth would cause their heads to implode; their current situation seemed much more beneficial.

“You’re welcome, Robin of Loxley,” Conner said. “And I’ll take you up on that.”

“WE WILL DO ANYTHING FOR YOU, SORCERER, ANYTHING AT ALL!” Robin Hood said.

“Well, in *that* case…,” Conner said, “absolutely no more singing about yourself! And you don’t have to call me *sorcerer*—it’s already getting old. I’m Conner Bailey, this is the Tin Woodman, and that’s Peter Pan.”

Robin Hood kissed their feet. Had he not been such a pretentious jerk, it might have been a bit uncomfortable, but they enjoyed seeing him so humbled.

“CONNER OF BAILEY, TIN OF WOODMAN, AND PETER OF

PAN," Robin Hood said, "ALLOW ME TO FORMALLY INTRODUCE THE MERRY BAND OF MEN BEHIND ME: LITTLE JOHN, WILL SCARLET, FRIAR TUCK, AND MY MINSTREL, ALAN-A-DALE."

Each of the Merry Men stood upright as his name was called and then fell back into a bow.

"YOUR REQUEST IS OUR COMMAND!" Robin Hood declared.

"Fantastic," Conner said, and rubbed his hands together. "First thing tomorrow, I'm going to give you a list of items I'll need help collecting."

"CONSIDER IT DONE!" he said.

Conner had been right all along—Robin Hood would prove to be *very* helpful.

Chapter Twenty-Three

LOST ADVICE

Red had only been with the Lost Boys for a couple of days, but she had come around to the idea of being a mother. As soon as the others left her in Neverland, the Lost Boys built her a spacious underground home. As Peter instructed, they followed every order she gave and waited on her hand and foot. She spent the days stretched out on a lounge chair they crafted from palm trees and she sipped coconut drinks they served her around the clock.

All the Lost Boys hoped for in return was a good bedtime story every night, which Red happily delivered. It was mindboggling to her why so many mothers complained; she found motherhood highly enjoyable.

"Can I get you another coconut drink, Mother?" Tootles asked.

"No thank you, Tobias," Red said. "I'm quite hydrated."

"Would you like me to fan you, Mum?" Slightly asked.

"Sweet Salvador, thank you, but I'm perfectly cool."

"Mommy, can I make you any snacks?" Curly asked.

"I'm not hungry, but thank you, Caesar."

"Is your chair comfortable enough, Mumzie?" Nibs asked.

"Most pleasantly, Nathaniel."

"Would you like us to rub your feet again, Mama?" the Lost twins asked.

"Thank you, my dear Jeffreys, but they're fine for now."

Red took a moment to watch proudly over her temporary sons. She had never expected the savage children she met on her first day in Neverland would turn out to be perfect gentlemen. All they'd needed were new names and someone to serve.

"Boys, you've been wonderful to Mother today," Red said. "So before we go to bed, I would like to treat you to another *bedtime story*!"

The Lost Boys cheered and eagerly sat on the floor around her. Each of

them looked up at her with huge smiles, most of which were missing baby teeth. Red had their undivided attention deficit disorders.

“Which story are you going to tell us tonight, Mother?” Tootles asked.

“One that is very close to my heart,” Red said. “It’s called ‘Beautiful and Brilliant Little Blue Riding Hood.’”

Just hearing the title made the Lost Boys excitedly clap.

“Is it a good story, Mum?” Slightly asked.

“It’s the best story you’ll ever hear,” Red said.

“Does Little Blue die in the end like Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel?” Curly asked. “I just want to know before I get attached.”

“Those were such sad stories,” Nibs said, and shook his head. “I can’t believe poor Cinderella slipped while running down the stairs at midnight, or that Snow White choked on the poisoned apple, or when Sleeping Beauty awoke, she discovered the spindle had given her a staph infection.”

“Poor, poor princesses,” the Lost twins sniffled.

“Well, these stories are supposed to teach us valuable lessons,” Red said. “Never run down stairs, always chew your food, and see a doctor if your skin is punctured by rusty metal.”

“Is there a lesson in the story of ‘Beautiful and Brilliant Little Blue Riding Hood’?” Slightly asked.

“You’ll have to wait and find out,” she teased.

The Lost Boys were on pins and needles. Red cleared her throat and began the story.

“Once upon a time, there was a beautiful and brilliant little girl named Red—excuse me—*Blue Riding Hood*,” Red said. “One day she was traveling through the woods to bring her granny a basket of goodies. The poor woman had a terrible cold, so the compassionate Little Blue wanted to pay her a visit and lift her spirits. But along the way, she was stopped by a humongous and ferocious wolf!”

The Lost Boys gasped and held one another tightly. The Lost twins even covered their eyes.

“Luckily, Little Blue was so beautiful, the wolf couldn’t find it in his heart to eat her,” Red said. “But the wolf tried tricking Little Blue into telling him where her grandmother lived so he could find the old woman and gobble her up! Thankfully, Little Red—excuse me—*Little Blue* was as

brilliant as she was beautiful, and she gave the wolf directions to another cottage in the woods. The wolf left Little Blue and headed to this cottage, only to find out she had misled him to the home of hunters!"

The Lost Boys howled with laughter at the wolf's misfortune.

"The wolf was killed by the hunters, and Little Blue enjoyed an afternoon with her grandmother," Red concluded. "The other villagers were so impressed with Little Blue's intelligence and bravery, they elected her queen of her very own kingdom! And they all lived happily ever after."

The end of the story was met with a warm round of applause.

"Did they really elect Little Blue *queen*?" Curly asked. "Just for tricking a wolf?"

"I may be paraphrasing, but pretty much," Red said.

"What happened to her after she became queen?" Slightly asked. "Did she get married or have children?"

"Funny you should ask," Red said. "Little Blue met a very special prince whom she loved very much, and they were *supposed* to get married. Unfortunately, the wedding didn't go as planned."

"What happened?" Tootles asked. "Did the wolf come back from the dead?"

"Worse," Red said. "A horrible and hideous goat stole the prince away from Little Blue."

"Oh, no!" Nibs exclaimed. "Why didn't Little Blue stop the goat?"

"There wasn't anything I—excuse me—*she* could do," Red said. "The prince was afraid that if he didn't leave with the goat, the creature would just hurt Little Blue. He sacrificed himself for her."

Slightly sighed and batted his eyes. "How romantic."

"I suppose he wasn't her true love, then," Tootles said. "Better to find out it's not meant to be before the wedding, rather than later after years of marriage."

"Quite right," Nibs said.

"The goat did Little Blue a favor," Curly said.

"Very true," the Lost twins said.

All the Lost Boys nodded their heads in agreement. Red was very confused because she couldn't disagree more—perhaps she had forgotten to tell something.

"Of course the prince was Little Blue's true love," Red said. "After

years of searching for love in the wrong places, she felt like she had finally found her missing piece. She was looking forward to spending the rest of her life with him. Not a day goes by that she doesn't spend hours thinking about how much she misses him and wishes something could have been done to stop the goat. *Little Blue cries whenever she thinks about the prince!*"

Red burst into tears and blew her nose into Tootles's sleeve. The Lost Boys eyed her suspiciously and then shared a smile. It was pretty obvious why the story meant so much to her.

"Let me ask you this," Tootles said. "If Little Blue had been kidnapped instead of the prince, what would he have done? Would he have sat around crying while he told her story?"

Red never thought about it. "I don't know," she said. "The prince probably would have fought the goat to the death. He would have rather died fighting for her than live another day without her."

"So why didn't Little Blue fight the goat?" Slightly asked. "Did the prince love her more than she loved him?"

Red shook her head. "No, they loved each other the same," she said. "If you had been at the wedding, you would understand. Little Blue begged the guests to help her, but no one would."

"That's a very interesting thing you just said," Curly said. "No one would *help* her. Do you understand the significance of this?"

"Curly's right," Nibs said. "Seems to me Little Blue is just so used to people doing things *for* her, she expects other people to solve all her problems. Like you said, a kingdom was just handed to her! She didn't even have to campaign or anything."

"If Little Blue truly loves the prince, she would go after the goat herself," Tootles said. "She wouldn't wait for anyone's help, or permission, or approval! She would fight the goat to the death, too, because she would rather die than live without him."

Red wanted to tell the Lost Boys they were wrong, but she couldn't think of a single reason why. *The Lost Boys were absolutely right!* Only Red knew what it was like to live with Red's heartbreak; she couldn't expect others to help her. Red was the only one who could relieve her pain —and she wasn't going to live with it anymore!

The young queen got to her feet and looked over her temporary sons

with very determined eyes.

“Boys, get your things,” Red ordered. “We’re going *goat hunting!*”

The Lost Boys quickly gathered their various homemade weapons. Red retrieved the *Peter Pan* book she was supposed to be watching and opened it. A bright beam of light emitted from it, illuminating the entire underground home.

Red peeked her head through the beam and looked into Oz. She saw Jack and Goldilocks asleep on the floor of the Wicked Witch of the West’s castle. Blubo was curled up beside them and the copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was lying next to him.

“Quickly and quietly, boys,” Red instructed the Lost Boys. “We’re going to go into Oz, then into the fairy-tale world, and then we’re going to rescue your temporary father!”

One by one, they carefully went into the beam of light and entered the witch’s castle. Red quietly took the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* book to the other side of the witch’s throne room and opened it. Red and the Lost Boys traveled through the next beam and arrived in the cave of the fairy-tale world.

They found Hagetta sitting just outside the cave’s entrance by a fire she had built.

“Red, what are you doing back?” Hagetta asked her. “Who are these children?”

“Hagetta, these are my temporary sons,” Red said. “Do you happen to know where the witch Morina lives?”

“I believe she has a home in the Dwarf Forests close to the Corner Kingdom border, although I’ve never been there myself,” Hagetta said. “Why do you ask?”

“Because the boys and I are going to get Charlie back!” Red said.

Before Hagetta could interject, Red led the Lost Boys to a grassy patch where Porridge, Oats, and Buckle were grazing. She helped the Lost twins onto Oats, and then climbed aboard Porridge with Tootles. Nibs, Curly, and Slightly mounted Buckle.

“Red, you can’t go after Morina,” Hagetta said as she ran after them. “She’s one of the most powerful witches in the world! You won’t stand a chance!”

“She can’t be any worse than a pirate!” Tootles said.

“Yeah, we can handle her!” Slightly said.

“We’ve got to rescue our mother’s true love!” Curly said.

“To the witch’s house!” Nibs yelled.

“Attack!” the Lost twins said.

“Hagetta, I have to do this,” Red said. “I can’t sit around and do nothing while some horned lunatic with a cauldron is holding the love of my life captive! Besides, if the roles were reversed, Charlie would do the same thing for me.”

Red took Porridge’s reins and led the way.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Red called back to Hagetta. “If you see Goldie before I get back, tell her we’ve borrowed her horses.”

There was nothing Hagetta could do to stop them—she had to stay at the cave and watch the book. Red and the Lost Boys traveled into the woods ahead and disappeared into the night.

“Oh, dear,” Hagetta said. “This isn’t going to end well.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE LADY OF THE LAKE

Arthur and Alex awoke the next morning before sunrise. Finding a branch from the oldest tree in the woods would be challenging, and they didn't want to waste a moment of daylight. They headed straight for the woods and searched for hours, traveling well beyond the parts of the forest Arthur was familiar with.

"We should mark the candidates as we find them," Alex said.

She pointed to a particularly old tree they came across and magically marked it with thousands of twinkling lights.

"But how will we know which one is the oldest?" Arthur asked. "Is there some sort of spell you can use to determine each tree's age?"

"Not that I know of," Alex said. "I was just planning to chop them in half and count the rings."

They searched the forest and marked the oldest trees well into the hours of the afternoon. At one point they entered a beautiful meadow and found Merlin and Mother Goose having a picnic. They were looking at the sky and taking turns magically shaping the clouds into objects and animals for the other to guess—a sorcerer's game of Pictionary.

"It's a rabbit—or a squirrel!" Mother Goose guessed. "No, it looks like a duck! Wait, I know what that is, it's Lester!"

"Correct! You're a natural at this, my dear!" Merlin said.

Lester was sitting beside them and was rather offended that the large fluffy cloud was supposed to resemble him. Alex could tell he had had his fill with Merlin and Mother Goose's shenanigans.

"Lester, would you like to help Arthur and me find the oldest tree in the woods?" Alex asked.

"Squaaa!" the gander said, and nodded gratefully.

Merlin and Mother Goose sat up once they saw Alex and Arthur had

joined them in the meadow.

“Don’t look at us,” Merlin said. “We may be the most ancient beings in the woods, but you can’t have any of our branches!”

“Good one, Merl!” Mother Goose laughed and clinked his cup with hers.

Alex couldn’t help but laugh, too—not at Merlin, but at Mother Goose. She had never seen Mother Goose enjoy herself as much as she did when she was with Merlin. She knew it was going to be difficult for her to part from Merlin when it was time to go back home, but Mother Goose wasn’t the only one who would be leaving someone special behind.

Alex and Arthur continued their quest with Lester waddling behind them.

“Merlin is going to miss Mother Goose,” Arthur said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so happy before.”

“Same for Mother Goose,” Alex said. “She’s been quite sad lately; it’s nice to hear her laugh for a change.”

“It’s probably for the best you two will be leaving shortly,” Arthur said. “Can you imagine the mischief they might get into if you stayed?”

“I’m afraid to think about it,” Alex said.

“I bet Merlin hopes Mother Goose still keeps in touch, though,” Arthur said, and stuck out his bottom lip. “Merlin would be so sad if he never heard from her again.”

Alex side-eyed him—obviously they weren’t talking about their elders anymore.

“I’m sure *Mother Goose* would love to keep in contact with *Merlin*,” Alex said. “But *Mother Goose* also knows that *Merlin* has a destiny to live, and she wouldn’t want to distract him from that.”

“Ah, yes,” Arthur said. “That whole *destiny* thing tends to get in the way of everything. That’s very kind of *Mother Goose*, then.”

Alex went quiet. She had known Arthur for a day and it was already hard to think about what life would be like without him. She tried to blame the sudden dependency on her age—what soon-to-be fifteen-year-old girl wouldn’t be smitten with such a handsome and smart young man like Arthur?

Although Alex had been smitten before, there was something special about Arthur. Perhaps in another lifetime, if they were beings of the same world, there could be more than friendship to explore. But she was very

aware of her situation and the situation waiting at home, so Alex didn't let the idea tease her.

Arthur had become very quiet, too. She wondered if he was thinking the same thing. Arthur broke the silence to play another round of his favorite new game—*pestering Alex*.

"Roughly how old am I when I'm crowned king?" he asked.

"Arthur, I told you I'm not telling you anything else," Alex said. "Some things are meant to be discovered in time."

"How about I say an age and you tell me if I'm close?" he suggested. "Twenty?"

"You're relentless," she said, and glared at him.

"Twenty-five?" Arthur asked.

Alex laughed at his persistence, but it only encouraged him.

"Thirty?" he asked. "Oh, come on, please don't tell me it's after forty!"

"To be honest, Arthur, I don't know," Alex said. "There are several versions of your story, and I'm not entirely sure which one I'm in."

Arthur found this prospect very intriguing. "*Versions*, you say?" he said. "So there's more than one of me? Right now there could be other Arthurs walking around other forests? Arthurs who are braver, stronger, and more *dashing* than I?"

"Impossible," Alex said with a smile. "There might be other versions of your story, but there's only one *Arthur* like you."

Arthur was very touched by this. "Do you think there are other versions of you as well?" he asked.

"Oh yes, but they aren't walking around other stories," she said. "There are plenty of versions other than the Alex you see beside you."

"Interesting," he said. "Care to share?"

"I don't want you to think less of me," Alex said.

"Come on, you know so much about me. Tell me the *worst* thing you've ever done. I promise I won't judge you."

Alex was reluctant to tell him anything, but if he was going to be insistent about something, it was better to tell him stories about her life than give anything else away about his.

"There was a period whenever I got overwhelmed or upset, I would unintentionally cause things to happen," Alex confessed.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Arthur said. "Please, continue."

“The first time I saw the Masked Man’s face I was convinced he was my father,” Alex explained. “No one believed me, but I knew what I saw. I spent months agonizing over how it was possible—how did my dad come back from the dead and become such a monster? The questions were torture and my tolerance was obliterated. Since my powers are fueled by my heart, my emotions would take over my body every time I became angry or sad—I had no control over what I said or did.”

“So what happened?” Arthur asked.

“One time my brother and I were chasing soldiers of the Grande Armée,” Alex said. “Just as they were getting away, I caused a brick wall to appear in front of them. They slammed into it and broke their noses.”

“So it works out in your favor sometimes,” Arthur said.

“Rarely,” Alex said. “I used to ride a unicorn named Cornelius. He’d take me all over the kingdoms to the people who needed a fairy. When we were looking for the Masked Man I was so desperate, I tried to use Cornelius to track him down. However, unicorns are magical creatures and they can’t be used selfishly. So when it didn’t work I became really frustrated and vines shot out of the ground and wrapped around him. He was scared of me for weeks but eventually came around, but I’ve tried to keep my distance ever since.”

Despite her obvious guilt, Arthur made light of it. “That’s kid’s stuff,” he said. “I know you’ve got a better story in you.”

“One time I raised a tavern above the clouds and dropped it,” she said.

“You’re joking! Was anyone inside of it?”

“Yes, *me!*” Alex said. “Not to mention my brother, all our close friends, and about a hundred witches. Luckily I came to my senses in time to save us before we crashed on the ground.”

“Anything else?” Arthur said.

Alex was afraid she might scare Arthur away with her stories, but he stayed right at her side, captivated by every word.

“Actually, yes. I may have skipped a few details about the time the Fairy Council ungodmothered me. I might have *accidentally* attacked them with lightning and then disappeared into a wall of flames.”

Arthur let out a sound that was half a laugh and half a gasp.

“Alex Bailey!” he condemned, but with a smirk. “Note to self: Never make you mad. I’m sure the council deserved it, though. Have you had any

other *episodes* since then?”

Alex thought about it and was very happy to realize she hadn’t.

“Not since I found out the Masked Man was my uncle,” Alex said. “He looks just like my dad—anyone else would have come to the same conclusion. I suppose knowing I wasn’t crazy like the rest of the world did put me in touch with my emotions.”

“But you said you *were certain* of what you saw,” Arthur said.

“And I was! Believe me.”

“So why did you let what others thought affect you so much?” he asked.

Alex had never put the whole experience into perspective. She and her brother had been through countless stressful situations where people often didn’t believe them. Why did this one bother her so much?

“I guess that’s a question as old as time, isn’t it?” Alex said. “Why do any of us let the world dictate our personal truths?”

“Squaaa…,” Lester squawked, as if to say, *“Tell me about it!”*

“Well, I only get two weeks with you after we collect the ingredients for the potion,” Arthur said. “But I hope to see as many versions of Alex as I can.”

Alex scrunched her lips so they wouldn’t stretch into another smile, but Arthur saw right through the effort. He was charming even when he didn’t mean to be.

“Fighting it only tempts me to make you smile more,” he warned.

They eventually discovered a large lake hidden deep in the woods. The water was cleaner and clearer than any other lake Alex had ever seen. There was a small island in the middle of the lake with nothing on it but a decrepit tree, by far the oldest tree they had encountered all day.

“That’s it!” Alex said. “That’s got to be the oldest tree in the woods!”

“How are we going to get to it?” Arthur asked.

Alex looked back at Lester and a needy smile came to her face. “Lester, would you mind transporting us to the island?”

Lester looked out at the island and sighed. He didn’t want to get his feathers wet, but since Alex rescued him from an afternoon of hearing the same stories told over and over again, he owed her one. He waddled down to the water and tested it with his webbed feet, sending a strong ripple through the still water.

The gander had a seat on the water but saw something that made him

leap back to the land.

“SQUAAA!” he squawked with fright. *“SQUAAA!”*

Lester was trembling and gestured to the water with his beak. A geyser of water rose out of the lake like a fountain in slow motion, twisting and looping through the air until it formed the shape of a woman. Like a heartbeat, every few seconds a ripple started at her chest and traveled through her whole body.

“No birds are allowed on my waters!” the water woman said. “Shoo! Go defecate someplace else!”

Lester hid behind Alex and Arthur, who stared up at the woman in awe. The woman was surprised to see them, but seemed delighted by the company.

“Oh, hello there,” she said. “I hope I didn’t frighten you. I work very hard to keep my lake pristine and must scare away the birds before they spoil my water. I didn’t realize he was a pet.”

Lester gave the woman a dirty look—who was she calling a pet?

“What—sorry—*who* are you?” Arthur asked.

“I know who she is,” Alex said. “Arthur, this is the Lady of the Lake!”

The Lady of the Lake was very pleased to be recognized. *“’Tis I!”* she announced happily. “It’s been ages since I had human visitors. My lake is so remote, very few people know it exists. What brings you here today?”

The Lady of the Lake seemed nice enough. Neither Alex nor Arthur felt the need to hide their intentions.

“We’re searching the forest for an ingredient needed for a potion,” Arthur said.

“Do you by chance know how old the tree on your island is?” Alex asked.

“It’s been there for centuries,” the Lady of the Lake said. “It may very well be the oldest tree in the forest.”

Alex and Arthur shared a smile and their spirits soared.

“Beautiful lady, would you kindly allow us to take a piece of it?” Arthur asked.

“Oh, certainly,” the Lady of the Lake said. “To be honest with you, it’s a bit of an eyesore. Feel free to take as much of it as you want.”

“Thank you so much!” Alex said. “It’s greatly appreciated.”

Alex, Arthur, and Lester approached the water. The Lady of the Lake put

her hand out to stop them.

“You two may cross my waters, but the bird may not,” she said. She waved a hand and a line of boulders rose out of the water, creating a bridge to the island.

“No problem,” Alex said. “Lester, stay here.”

The goose watched as Alex and Arthur hopped across the rocks to the island. Arthur retrieved a dagger from his boot and cut off a small branch.

“Let’s get back to Merlin’s now and start the potion,” he said.

“Excuse me? Did you just say *Merlin*?” the Lady of the Lake asked.

“Yes, he’s a wizard,” Arthur said. “Do you know of him?”

“Of course I do,” she said. “But how do *you* know him?”

“He’s a friend and mentor,” Arthur said.

It was like he’d said something that offended her. Suddenly, their bridge of boulders sank back into the lake. A wall of water shot into the air around the island, trapping Alex and Arthur.

“What are you doing?” Alex asked.

“Friends of Merlin are not friends of mine!” the Lady of the Lake yelled. Her voice no longer had such a cheery disposition, but a scornful tone.

The wall of water around the island began closing in on Alex and Arthur. Alex tried using magic to hold it back, but every time she raised a hand, a jet of water knocked it down.

“*Oy, bird!* Go find Merlin! Tell him the Lady of the Lake requests his presence, and if he ignores my request this time, his friends will drown,” the Lady of the Lake ordered.

Lester didn’t waste a minute. He flew into the sky and headed for help, squawking as he went.

“Dear lady, I don’t know what your quarrel is with Merlin, but it has nothing to do with us,” Arthur said. “Please let us go!”

The Lady of the Lake ignored him. Her attention was fixed on her own reflection in the water. She conducted the water, forming her body to decrease and increase in places, giving herself a more attractive shape. Her hair grew longer, her waist smaller, and her hips curvier. She hummed to herself as she made the adjustments, like she was preparing for a *date.*

A few minutes later, Lester returned with Merlin and Mother Goose on his back. They hopped off the bird and charged down to the edge of the lake.

“Merlin, help us!” Arthur pleaded.

“Nimue, what is the meaning of this?” Merlin said to the Lady of the Lake.

“Hello, Merlin,” she said. “It’s been a long time!”

“Release our apprentices at once!” Merlin demanded.

“Is *that* how you treat all the lovers you haven’t seen in two hundred years?” the Lady of the Lake asked.

“Lovers?” Mother Goose said. “What could you possibly bring to a relationship? Hydration?”

“We’ve been through this a thousand times, Nimue,” Merlin said. “We were never together and we never will be!”

“How can you say that after the romantic month we spent in the cave off the shore together?” the Lady of the Lake asked. “Or have you forgotten about that?!”

“I have not forgotten,” Merlin said. “You’ve flooded your brain and washed away all the sense, Nimue! You *imprisoned* me in that cave!”

“But when I released you, you promised to meet me at this lake!” she said. “I’ve waited here for you for hundreds of years!”

“I *lied* to get out of the cave!” Merlin said. “You forced yourself upon me so much, it’s a wonder I didn’t *prune* to death!”

The Lady of the Lake’s heartbeat raced so fast, her body was rippling out of control.

“Time to let it go, H20!” Mother Goose said. “Let those children go or we’ll—”

The Lady of the Lake suddenly grew four times in size, draining half the lake in the process. “OR WHAT?” she asked.

The water crept closer and closer to Alex and Arthur on the island—they were running out of land. They were moments away from being completely submerged. Clearly, Merlin and Mother Goose’s demands weren’t getting them anywhere.

“Let’s calm down and make an agreement, then,” Merlin said. “Take me instead of the children.”

“Oh, Merl, you can’t let this oversized puddle take you!” Mother Goose said.

“It’s all right, I’ve dealt with damper characters before,” he said. “So how ’bout it, Nimue? Will you hand over our apprentices in exchange for

me?”

The Lady of the Lake considered it. Her rapidly rippling body calmed down and she reduced in size.

“I can live with that,” she said.

The wall of water around the island dissolved and the boulders resurfaced. Merlin hopped across to the island, but before Alex and Arthur had time to cross to the land, the wall of water returned, trapping all three of them on the island.

“Nimue! We had an agreement!” Merlin yelled.

“I know, but I *lied*!” The Lady of the Lake laughed. “Isn’t it wonderfully ironic?”

Merlin, Arthur, and Alex all exchanged horrified looks. They didn’t know how they were going to get out of this one.

“Hey! *Lunatic of the Lake!* I’m giving you one last warning: Free my friends, or I’m coming in there!” Mother Goose warned.

The Lady of the Lake laughed at her pityingly. “And what are you going to do, Granny?” she asked. “Geriatric aerobics?”

Mother Goose squinted, her jaw fell open, and her cheeks turned red. Lester covered his eyes with his wings—he knew this wasn’t going to be pretty.

“Call me *Granny* one more time! I dare you!” she said.

“GRANNY! GRANNY! GRANNY!” the Lady of the Lake sang.

Mother Goose had had enough. She cracked her neck and rolled up her sleeves. It was time to take matters into her own hands.

“That’s it, sister!” she said. “You’ve pushed me to the edge and let me dangle!”

Mother Goose ran into the lake and started punching and kicking the water. The Lady of the Lake just laughed at her attempts to cause harm. She sent several tall waves toward her, each one stronger than the next, knocking Mother Goose under, deep below the surface.

“Mother Goose!” Alex yelled.

“Let her go, you miserable pond!” Merlin ordered.

“Sorry, Merlin, but your friend is all *washed up*!” the Lady of the Lake said.

Just when they feared Mother Goose would never resurface, all the water in the lake gradually began to whirl in a clockwise direction. The

flow increased, catching the Lady of the Lake's attention, but she couldn't regain control of it. The water spun around the island faster and faster. Soon it was moving so fast, the Lady of the Lake couldn't keep her human form and dissipated into the rest of the water.

The spinning lake rose into the air, forming a small hurricane. It was a powerful storm, and Merlin, Arthur, and Alex held on to the island tree with all their might so they wouldn't be blown away. They saw Mother Goose standing at the bottom of the lake, twirling the storm into the air like a giant liquid lasso.

"TIME TO EVAPORATE, YOU WET WENCH!" Mother Goose yelled.

She released her grip of the water, and every drop of the lake flew into the sky and turned into rain, misting the forest around them for miles. The lake was nothing but a wide empty hole in the woods now.

Merlin, Arthur, and Alex were in shock—they still grasped the island tree even though the storm was gone. Mother Goose brushed off her hands and placed them on her hips. She found their dumbfounded faces very amusing.

"I don't know about you, but I've worked up quite an appetite," she said. "Let's get some dinner."

Once they had eaten, Merlin let Alex borrow a small cauldron so she could begin making the Portal Potion. She filled it with water and placed it over the fireplace to let it boil. She cut the tree branch into tiny pieces and added it and Lester's feather to the cauldron.

"All we need is a liquefied lock and key from a loved one," Alex said.

Arthur went down the hall of Merlin's cottage. Alex heard two loud *clunk*s and Arthur returned with a lock and key.

"Where did you get those?" Alex asked.

"I just chipped them off of Merlin's bedroom door," he said. "He's like a father to me, so it should work."

Alex put the objects in a separate cauldron and then placed it into the fireplace with the other. Once the lock and key melted, she quickly poured the mixture in with the other ingredients before it became solid again.

"Now all we need is two weeks of moonlight," Alex said.

“I know the perfect place,” Arthur said.

After the sun set, Arthur escorted Alex to a very tall and grassy hill a little ways into the woods. They could see the entire forest from the hill and it also gave them the perfect view of the moon and stars. They placed the cauldron on the ground and lay on either side of it while the potion soaked up the moonlight.

“It’s so interesting,” Alex said. “The moon and the stars look exactly the same here as they do in the fairy-tale world and the Otherworld.”

“Perhaps you can take me to your world someday?” Arthur said. “I would love to see the Otherworld and the fairy-tale world.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Alex said playfully. “You’re very popular there. It would be very easy to snoop around and find out about your destiny.”

Arthur went silent and looked a little sad. There was something troubling him.

“What’s wrong?” Alex asked. “Did I say something to upset you?”

“Of course not, I just haven’t been very honest with you,” he said. “I *know* all the answers to the questions I tease you with. Merlin thinks he keeps a tight lip, but all he needs is a little ale in his system and I can get any answer out of him that I want. I know how old I am when I’m crowned and I know I’ll be a great king. I also know about Camelot, the Round Table, and Guinevere.”

“Then why have you been pestering me so much?” Alex asked.

“Because you’re awfully cute when you try concealing information,” Arthur said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Can’t say they have,” Alex said. “Thank you—I’m glad I amuse you so much.”

“You amuse me and *amaze* me,” he said. “There are a lot of things you make me feel.…”

Arthur became quiet. Alex knew they had to change the subject. If they were any more honest with each other, it would only make their eventual farewell that much more painful.

“Can I ask you a question, from someone whose destiny isn’t written yet?” Alex asked.

“Of course,” Arthur said.

“If you know of all the challenges, all the pain, and all the heartbreak

you'll endure, why stay on the path destiny has paved for you? Why not venture off and try creating a life for yourself that will be more enjoyable?"

Arthur didn't have to think long. The answer was engrained in his heart.

"I'd like to think the choice falls under our pact of *true greatness*," he said. "I believe the people of England deserve a great king. And if I'm meant to be that man—a man whose legacy will inspire the present and the future of the kingdoms here and even beyond the kingdoms of this world, then it's worth every sacrifice."

Alex was so moved and impressed by his answer, it sent chills through her whole body.

"I thought I knew everything about you, Arthur, but you keep surprising me," she said.

He turned his head to her and they stared into each other's eyes.

"Besides, who really knows what the future holds?" Arthur said. "As I learned yesterday, you never know when someone might drop in and change your world forever."

As she looked into Arthur's blue eyes, Alex felt her mind slowly lose control of her body—but this time it was taken over by her heart. She leaned over and kissed Arthur more passionately than she had ever kissed anyone. It surprised her as much as it surprised him.

"I like this version of you," Arthur said.

"Me too," Alex said. "It's new."

There were a thousand reasons why she shouldn't have done it, but nothing seemed worse than not doing it again. But Arthur kissed Alex back before she had the chance. They lay under the stars and kissed each other until there was no moonlight left for the potion to absorb.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE WITCH OF PAPPLENICK

Conner should have known better than to trust the Merry Men. The morning after the Sheriff of Nottingham was scared off, he assigned Little John and Will Scarlet to find two of the ingredients he needed for the Portal Potion. A few hours later, they returned with the exact opposites of what Conner requested.

Little John dragged a freshly chopped tree into camp and proudly presented it to Conner. It was lively and covered in bright green leaves.

"I thought you'd want to choose the branch, so I brought the whole tree," Little John said.

Will Scarlet followed shortly after with a caged pheasant. The bird was so old, all its remaining feathers were gray. It wheezed so heavily, each breath had the potential to be its last.

"I found him just sitting in the woods," Will Scarlet said. "He didn't even put up a fight when I caged him."

Conner sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"Guys, *thank you*," he said. "But you mixed up my instructions. I said I needed a branch from the *oldest tree* in the woods and a feather from the *finest pheasant*."

Little John and Will Scarlet pointed to each other, as if the other was to blame.

"That's what *I* thought you said, but *he* told me you needed the *oldest pheasant*!" Will Scarlet said.

"No, *you* told *me* he needed the *finest tree* in the woods!" Little John said.

"I did not!"

"You did too!"

Conner stepped between them just as they were reaching for their

weapons. “Stop fighting!” he said. “You both need to try again. I’ll send the Tin Woodman and Peter with you this time so you don’t get confused.”

The Tin Woodman and Peter followed Little John and Will Scarlet back into the forest. They passed Robin Hood, who was finally returning from an errand Conner sent him on the night before.

“I HAVE RETURNED!” he announced.

“Did you get the lock and key from Maid Marian?” Conner said.

Robin Hood leaped off his horse with a triumphant smile—but his face quickly fell flat.

“NO,” he said. “I HAVE FAILED YOU, SORCERER. I SPENT ALL NIGHT OUTSIDE MAID MARIAN’S CASTLE WINDOW. I ANNOUNCED MY PRESENCE AND I CALLED HER NAME, BUT SHE NEVER OPENED HER WINDOW.”

“Dang it,” Conner said. “Does anyone else in this camp have a girlfriend?”

Alan-a-Dale and Friar Tuck were the only Merry Men left at the camp. The candidates weren’t promising.

“Never mind,” Conner said. “Robin, can you go back to the castle tonight and try wooing her?”

“ANYTHING FOR YOU, SORCERER,” Robin Hood said. “BUT I FEAR THAT MAY NOT WORK. I FEEL AS IF MAID MARIAN AND I ARE DRIFTING APART. THEREFORE, EVEN IF I COLLECTED A LOCK AND KEY FROM HER, THEY MAY NOT BE WORTHY OF YOUR POTION.”

Conner slapped his hand on his forehead—he couldn’t believe his luck. If he wanted to go home, he would have to solve Robin Hood’s relationship problems on top of everything else.

“Robin, let’s have a chat,” he said.

“WHAT IS A *CHAT*, GREAT SORCERER?” Robin Hood asked.

“It’s a *talk*—let’s sit down and talk.”

Conner had a seat by the campfire and Robin Hood sat across from him.

“Let me ask you a question,” Conner said. “When you talk to Maid Marian, *DO YOU ALWAYS TALK LIKE THIS?*”

Robin Hood gave him a funny look.

“THERE IS NO NEED TO SHOUT, SORCERER,” Robin Hood said. “MY HEARING IS IMPECCABLE! I HAVE THE EARS OF A FOX.”

Conner rolled his eyes. He had never met anyone so clueless in his entire life—Robin Hood made Red look like a Rhodes scholar.

“Robin, I don’t know another way to put this, but you’re *volume challenged*,” he said. “Maid Marian probably needs a break from you so her eardrums can heal. Tonight when you call for her, I want you to speak to her like you would talk to a baby.”

“A BABY, YOU SAY?” Robin Hood asked. Conner covered his mouth with his finger.

“Much quieter than that,” Conner whispered. *“Pretend Marian is a small, delicate infant with sensitive ears.”*

Robin Hood didn’t understand the point of this, but he would oblige any request from his sorcerer.

“Next question,” Conner said. “What do you and Marian talk about when you’re together?”

“THE DOWNFALL OF PRINCE JOHN AND THE RESTORATION OF NOTTINGHAM!” he said.

“Tonight, I want you to start with a simple *how are you?*” Conner instructed. “Ask her how her day was. Compliment what she’s wearing. Ask her if she got her hair cut.”

“BUT MARIAN’S HAIR IS ALWAYS COVERED BY A VEIL,” Robin Hood said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Conner said. “Girls like to feel special. They don’t always want to hear about your battles or pillages or whatever else you Merry Men do. They want to know about your *feelings*, especially how *they* make you feel.”

“MARIAN MAKES ME FEEL LIKE THE LUCKIEST MAN IN NOTTINGHAM,” Robin Hood said.

“Bingo!” Conner said. “Make sure to tell her that.”

It was obvious by the face Robin was making that being considerate was something he had never considered.

“THANK YOU, O SORCERER,” he said, and gave Conner a strong pat on the back. “YOU ARE WISE IN THE WAYS OF WOMEN. IS THERE A *SORCERESS* IN YOUR LIFE?”

Conner smiled. “There might be an iron in my fire.”

“SORCERER, YOU MUSTN’T LEAVE AN IRON IN THE FIRE TOO LONG, IT MIGHT BURN YOU WHEN YOU COME BACK FOR IT,”

Robin Hood said.

Conner couldn't tell if this was another clueless remark or a deep metaphor. Either way, Robin Hood was right.

Friar Tuck tapped Conner on the shoulder. "Sorcerer, forgive my interruption, but may I ask you something?"

"Yes, Padre Tuck?" Conner asked.

"Friar," Tuck corrected. "I made a list of the items you need for your potion. Should the others return with the correct items, all you would need is moonlight and a *splash of magic*, as you described. Is that something you will need collected, or were you planning to supply it yourself?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that part," Conner said. He forgot his sister wasn't there to finalize the potion with magic. "Friar, if the sorcerer was tired, is there anyone else in Nottingham who could supply some magic?"

"Normally, Sorcerer, it isn't my nature to dwell on witchcraft," Tuck said. He looked around the woods to make sure other friars weren't listening. "However, there is a horrid woman living in the castle who I believe has *danced with the devil*, if you will. Her name is Maudlin, known throughout Nottingham as *the Witch of Papplenick*, and she works for the sheriff."

Alan-a-Dale strummed a dramatic tune on his mandolin that made Conner jump.

"She predicts his future,
And curses his enemies,
With devilish concoctions,
She heals his injuries."

"Great," Conner said sarcastically. "And someone would have to sneak into the castle to get to her?"

"I would assume so," Tuck said.

Conner didn't know why he was surprised. It wasn't a real Bailey scavenger hunt unless the fear of capture, torture, and death was a possibility. Conner knew he would have to find her by himself—he couldn't risk one of the Merry Men screwing it up.

"Robin, you're in luck," Conner said. "You'll have a travel buddy tonight. I'm going to the castle with you."

Later that evening, as the sun began its descent, Conner and Robin Hood traveled to Nottingham Castle. They wore dark cloaks to camouflage

themselves in the night and traveled from tree to tree in case any of the sheriff's soldiers were wandering the forest. Nottingham Castle was an enormous medieval fortress constructed from large stones.

Most of the windows were very narrow—barely enough room for an arm to squeeze through. Robin Hood led Conner to a larger glass window and stood below it.

"LOVE OF MY LIFE, 'TIS I, ROBIN HOOD!" he called up to it.

Maid Marian appeared in the window. She was pretty and wore a purple veil over her head. She looked down at the ground and when she saw Robin Hood she quickly ducked behind the window, obviously trying to avoid him. Unfortunately, he saw her, and Robin Hood was heartbroken.

"YOU SEE, SORCERER, IT IS JUST AS I TOLD YOU," Robin Hood said. "HER AFFECTION FOR ME HAS DRAINED FROM HER HEART."

"That's because you said hello like there was a stampede running behind her," Conner said. "Try what we talked about—pretend she's a baby!"

Robin Hood looked back to the window and tried again.

"Lovely lady, please open the window so I may see your beautiful eyes," Robin Hood said.

He sounded like a totally different person with a quieter tone. Maid Marian peeked over the windowsill with very large eyes—*was that Robin Hood?* She opened the window and looked down to make sure.

"Robin of Loxley?" she asked.

"My dear Marian, you look so beautiful tonight!" Robin Hood said. "Is that a new veil?"

"Yes, it *is*!" Marian said. She was shocked he had noticed.

"I must say, there isn't another maiden in all the land who looks diviner than thee tonight," Robin Hood said.

He took off his hat and gave her a small bow. Maid Marian blushed and covered her mouth to hide her grin.

"Oh, Robin." She giggled. "Can you even see my veil from all the way down there?"

"Will you let me into your room so I may see it closer?" Robin Hood asked.

"Smooth!" Conner whispered, and gave him a thumbs-up.

Marian lowered a rope of sheets tied together. Robin Hood used it to

climb up the side of the castle and sat on the windowsill. They shared a kiss and Robin crawled into Marian's room.

"Nice work!" Conner called to the window. "Don't forget the lock and key!"

He was so relieved—he wondered if he could have a future in couple's counseling. His relief quickly wore off once he realized he still had to find his own way inside the castle to find the Witch of Papplenick.

Conner ran around the castle but couldn't find a door or a window big enough to crawl through. He eventually found the castle's gate and shook it to see if he could pry it open, but it was solid as a rock. Just as he stepped away from it, the gate started rising. Four soldiers appeared behind it, exiting the castle.

With no time to hide and very few places to go, Conner pressed his body as flat as he could to the side of the castle and closed his eyes. He prayed he would magically blend into the wall like a chameleon. Luckily, the soldiers' helmets were so large, their view was obstructed. All four of them walked right past him. Once they were out of sight, Conner dived under the gate and entered the castle.

The castle was fairly empty, and the footsteps of any approaching soldier clanked so loudly, Conner heard them coming long before he saw them. The inside of the castle looked exactly like the outside. It was nothing but long halls of stone walls and small windows.

"Let's see, if I were a resident witch, where would I be?" Conner whispered to himself. "Either the attic or the basement—that's where witches are always hiding out in these stories."

He found a staircase and hurried down it. It led him to a large steel door with spikes on it. He heard a whip crack and then a man scream.

"Nope, that's definitely *the dungeon*," he said, and quickly turned around.

He searched the castle for a way into the towers, assuming the witch had to live inside one of them. He found a spiral staircase and climbed it higher and higher, growing dizzy as it curled upward. At the top of the stairs he found another door—but this one was ajar.

Conner peeked inside a small circular room; without a doubt he had reached the top of a tower. The room was filled with shelves and tables covered by strange things. There were jars of plants, liquids, and small

animals. There were cages of larger animals and potion bottles and cauldrons. It was definitely the room of a witch.

Conner crept inside. “Excuse me, Miss Papplenick? Maudlin?”

He found the witch sitting in a chair in the middle of the room. She had thin gray hair, very wrinkled pale skin, and wore black tattered robes. Her eyes were closed and she was as still as a stone. In fact, she didn’t even appear to be breathing.

“*Please* be alive,” Conner said.

Just as he stepped closer to check her pulse, someone else ran up the stairs behind him and knocked loudly on the door. Conner quickly hid behind a table of potions.

“Maudlin? Are you decent?” a man said at the door.

The witch snorted and stirred to life. “Yes, Sheriff.” She coughed. “You may enter.”

The Sheriff of Nottingham stepped inside the tower and slammed the door behind him. He was a tall and regal man, but once he was alone with the witch, he hunched over and burst into hysterical tears like a small child.

“I’m not having a good night, Maudlin,” the sheriff wailed.

“There, there, Sheriff,” Maudlin said, and stood to give him a hug. “Come sit down and tell Aunt Maud what happened.”

She sat the sheriff in her seat and stroked his hair like she would a doll’s. Conner couldn’t believe his eyes—he was so embarrassed just by *watching* the sheriff that he looked around the tower for a way out.

“I just want M-M-Maid M-M-Marian to love me!” the sheriff cried. “No matter what I do she’ll always h-h-hate me! I’ve given her a nice home, I buy her nice dresses and veils, and she still treats me like I’m her captor.”

“Now, now, Sheriff,” Maudlin said. “Marian just needs time to come around, that’s all. I told you, women love playing hard to get.”

“I don’t think she’s interested in me,” the sheriff sobbed. “I just knocked on her door to say good night, and she wouldn’t even open it to look at me! I’m afraid Marian might be in love with someone else!”

“Then she’s daft, if you ask me,” Maudlin said. “Who could possibly be more handsome, or braver, or more powerful than our Sheriff of Nottingham? There isn’t a more suitable bachelor around for miles, and if she can’t see that, then she doesn’t deserve you. Who else could protect Nottingham better than our sheriff? *No one*. Who else could achieve Prince

John’s vision of our kingdom? *No one*. Who else could keep that nasty thief Robin Hood at bay but our sheriff? *No one!* Any girl would be lucky to get a look from you.”

Her compliments must have done the trick, because the sheriff’s tears dried up and his frown turned into a bashful smile.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said. “Thank you, Aunt Maud.”

“You’re very welcome, dearie,” the witch said.

“I just wish I didn’t have to try so hard,” the sheriff said. “It makes my stomach turn and gives me a throbbing headache just thinking about it! I haven’t been able to sleep for days!”

“Let Aunt Maud take care of that for you,” Maudlin said.

The witch searched through her things and placed a glass of water on the table beside the sheriff. She retrieved a root from one jar, a piece of bark from another, and an herb from the next. She crushed each item up and mixed it into the water.

“Alka root to calm your stomach, bark of an aspirin tree to sooth your head, and the wort of St. John to help you sleep,” Maudlin said.

She handed the sheriff the glass and he drank the concoction in one gulp.

Conner thought it was a pretty harmless mixture for such a renowned witch. He took a closer look around the tower and realized the items weren’t dangerous at all. There was nothing he saw that he couldn’t get in a grocery store in the Otherworld. The small animals weren’t sacrifices for future potions—they were pets.

“There’s nothing magical about the Witch of Papplenick,” he whispered to himself. “She’s not even a witch—*she’s a pharmacist!*”

“I feel much better already, ” the sheriff said.

“Now, let’s go to your chambers and I’ll tuck you in,” Maudlin said. “You’ll get a good night’s rest and come back to me tomorrow if you need anything else.”

“I will,” the sheriff said. “Thank you, Aunt Maud.”

Maudlin escorted the sheriff out of the tower and down the stairs to his chambers.

Conner was extremely disheartened. Thankfully, magic was the last ingredient the Portal Potion required. He would have two weeks to find someone else who could provide it while the other ingredients brewed in the potion. However, if Maudlin was any indication, someone with magical

capability may be hard to find in the world of *Robin Hood*. Conner's stomach turned at the thought of it and he helped himself to some alka root on his way out of the tower.

He quickly and quietly climbed down the stairs and found the castle's gate. He waited until the soldiers returned from their patrol shifts, pressing against the wall as he did before, and snuck outside.

He found Maid Marian's window and threw a rock at it. Robin Hood peered outside.

"Wrap it up!" Conner called out. "We've got to get back to the camp."

"Farewell, my love," Robin Hood said quietly—at least for him. He kissed Maid Marian and then climbed the rope of sheets to the ground. Maid Marian waved him off as he and Conner ran into the forest.

"How did it go?" Conner asked.

"IT WAS A GREAT SUCCESS, SORCERER," Robin Hood said, back to his normal tone. He opened his hand and showed Conner a small lock and key he had acquired from Maid Marian. "THIS SHOULD WORK NOW THAT OUR AFFECTION HAS BEEN RESTORED."

"That's great!" Conner said.

"DID YOU RETRIEVE THE MAGIC FROM THE EVIL WITCH OF PAPPLENICK?" he asked.

Conner sighed and shook his head. "Maudlin isn't going to work out for us," Conner said. "I'll have to figure something else out."

Robin Hood and Conner journeyed through the woods until they arrived back at the camp. They found the Tin Woodman, Peter, and the Merry Men waiting by the campfire.

"Conner, Little John and I brought back a branch from the oldest tree in the woods," the Tin Woodman was happy to share.

"And I flew into the sky and plucked a feather from the finest pheasant I could find," Peter said.

"That's terrific!" Conner said. "And Robin just got his hands on a lock and key from Maid Marian. We have enough ingredients to start the potion."

He borrowed a pot and pan from the Merry Men and went to work. He boiled water in the pot and added the tree branch and the feather. Once the lock and key had been melted in the pan, he poured it into the pot with the rest of the potion.

Little John climbed to the top of a nearby tree and Peter flew the potion to him. Together they rigged the pot to the tree so it would have a better view of the moon and soak up its light.

“We’ll bring it down in two weeks,” Peter said.

“Did you get the magic you needed?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“No,” Conner said sadly. “Modern medicine was considered *magic* in the early centuries, but it’s no good to us. Our new task is finding someone of *real* magic capabilities, like my sister.”

“It’s too bad I’m out of pixie dust.” Peter sighed.

“Hold on a moment,” the Tin Woodman said. “Why can’t you do it, Conner?”

Peter shrugged—it seemed logical to him, too. Conner was already shaking his head before he thought it through, like they had asked him to juggle knives.

“I don’t do magic,” Conner said.

“But your sister can,” Peter said. “So why can’t you?”

“I suppose I *could*, I just don’t,” he said. “Magic is very tricky. There are a lot of layers to it and I’ve never done it before—at least, not without my sister.”

The Tin Woodman and Peter were very confused. Of all things, why was Conner self-conscious about *this?*

“But *could* you if you *wanted* to?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“Yes—I mean, no—I don’t know,” Conner said.

Conner supposed it was a possibility, given his DNA, but he couldn’t make any promises. He had always considered magic to be like math; it was a skill Alex and only Alex had inherited.

“We’ve only got two weeks before that potion is ready, mate,” Peter said.

“You should think it over in case we can’t find anyone else,” the Tin Woodman said. “If we don’t find someone, we’ll be stuck with the Merry Men forever.”

The more Conner thought about it, the more the pressure increased. It wasn’t necessarily *magic* he was afraid of; he was never good in *any* situation when something depended solely on him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE BASEMENT

Red and the Lost Boys followed Hagetta's directions and traveled through the Dwarf Forests toward the Corner Kingdom. The Lost Boys had never been in such an unnerving place. They were constantly on the lookout as they journeyed deeper into the mysterious and thick woods. Red, on the other hand, never gave their eerie surroundings a second thought. Her mind was fixated on one thing and one thing only: saving Froggy.

It grew late, and the night was always darker in the Dwarf Forests. They followed a river as it traveled south. They discovered a house on the other side with a tall hay roof and a watermill that turned as the river ran through it. The sight of it sent chills down Red's spine and she knew they had arrived.

"We're here, boys," Red said. "That's the goat's house. Porridge, I want you to take Oats and Buckle somewhere safe. I'll whistle for you when I need you—and if you hear one of us scream, go get help."

Red helped the Lost Boys down from the horses and Porridge led her family out of sight into the trees. Red and the Lost Boys crouched behind the bushes and watched the house.

"Is our temporary dad in there?" Tootles asked.

"I certainly hope so," Red said.

"What are we going to do, Mum?" Slightly asked.

"Should we just barge in and take him?" Nibs asked.

"Attack?" the Lost twins asked.

Before she could answer, cellar doors on the side of the house opened. Morina peeked her head up from below the house and looked around the forest. Red and the Lost Boys hit the ground and watched her through the bushes. They were afraid she might have heard them, but the witch wasn't looking for something in particular; she scanned the forest in *all* directions.

Once Morina determined the forest was empty, she went back underground.

“That’s the goat, all right!” Red whispered.

“Do you think she saw us?” Tootles asked.

Suddenly, a loud sound came from below the house as something heavy was dragged up the steps. Morina reappeared, pulling a wooden coffin out from under her house. She dragged it to the riverbank and then returned to the cellar. A few moments later, she dragged another coffin out and set it beside the other one.

Morina pushed the coffins into the river and they floated downstream. She went to the watermill and gave it a strong tug, pushing it against the river’s current. Slowly but surely, the river magically began flowing in *the opposite direction,* sending the coffins *upstream* into the Dwarf Forests.

The witch waited for the caskets to drift out of sight, then she turned the windmill in the opposite direction. A few moments later, the river began flowing south again. Morina descended back underground and they heard her lock the cellar doors with bolts and chains.

“So *she’s* the one behind the bodies of Dead Man’s Creek!” Red whispered.

“Dead Man’s Creek?” Curly asked, and gulped fearfully.

“I’ll tell you about it once you outgrow your night terrors, Caesar,” Red said.

Morina exited the house again, this time using the front door. She was wearing a long black-feathered coat and she carried a small bag. She walked down to the river where a small boat was docked and sat inside it. The witch released the boat from the land and it magically cruised down the river toward the Corner Kingdom.

Red waited until Morina was long gone before getting to her feet.

“We’re in luck, boys,” Red said. “It looks like the goat has left the stable. Let’s sneak inside the house and find your temporary father.”

The river wasn’t very deep, so Red made the Lost Boys get in and carry her across the water so her dress wouldn’t get wet. Once they made it to the other side, they tried entering the house through the cellar doors, but they wouldn’t budge. They walked around the house to the front door, but it was locked, too.

“Oh dear,” Red said. *“Charlie, are you in there?”*

She knocked on the door but there was no response. The Lost Boys

exchanged a smile.

“Time for a Curly toss!” Tootles said.

“What’s a curly toss?” Red asked.

“We’ll show you!” Nibs said.

The Lost Boys each grabbed one of Curly’s limbs and raised him off the ground. They swung him in the air and slammed his chubby body against the door, breaking it down.

“Ouch,” Curly said from the floor of the house.

“Good boy, Caesar,” Red said. “Mama is so proud!”

Red led the way inside, stepping over Curly as she went. They eyed the front room of Morina’s house and ogled all the shelves of colorful liquids. It was unlike any place they had ever been. Unfortunately, there was no sign of Froggy anywhere.

“What kind of place is *this*?” Tootles asked.

“It reminds me of a hospital,” Nibs said.

“For such a sophisticated place, the juice tastes terrible,” Slightly said.

Red and the other boys quickly turned to Slightly and saw him chug down a bottle of pink potion.

“Salvador, don’t drink that!” Red warned, but it was too late. Slightly transformed into a toddler before their eyes. He looked up at the others in shock and started crying.

“Amazing!” the Lost Boys said in unison.

“No one touch anything else,” Red ordered. “Tobias, look after your new baby brother—hopefully Alex can change him back when she and Conner return.”

Tootles picked Slightly up and cradled him until his tears stopped.

The Lost Boys found a tassel on the wall and pulled on it. Curtains on the wall separated and the Mirror of Truth was revealed. Red and the boys looked in at their reflections, but nothing changed. Their outer truth was as real as their inner truth.

Red searched the room, but there was no sign of Froggy anywhere.

“Mother, over here!” Nibs said. “It’s a door!”

He directed Red to the door on the back wall covered in a dozen locks. She figured Froggy was probably on the other side of it.

“Oh, Caeeesar?” Red sang.

Before he knew it, Curly was lifted into the air again by the other Lost

Boys and his temporary mother.

“Let’s give him a really powerful swing this time,” Red instructed. “There are a lot of locks to break. On three… *one… two… three!*”

After a few aggressive swings to gain momentum, they let him go and he slammed through the door. There was a staircase behind it and Curly rolled down into a basement.

“Ouch,” Curly said.

“Is there anyone down there, Caesar?” Red asked.

He never responded. Red and the Lost Boys climbed down the steps after him. What they saw in the basement would haunt their nightmares for years to come.

Curly was on his feet, staring into the room in shock. There were twenty-four beds in the basement—twelve lined against one side, and twelve on the other. The last four beds were empty, but twenty of the beds were filled *with sleeping children*. Each child was *glowing*, but as the light emitted from their bodies it slowly drained into potion bottles at the foot of their beds.

The farther back the bed, the older the child looked. The last few didn’t even look like children anymore, but petite senior citizens. Their faces were wrinkled and their hair was gray.

“These must be *the missing children*!” Red gasped.

“What’s happening to them?” Tootles asked.

Red noticed that the walls were lined with empty coffins. She covered her mouth, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Morina is draining their youth and beauty to make potions!” Red said. “She’s a monster!”

Red and the Lost Boys stared around at the cursed children in disbelief. They wanted to free them from whatever enchantment was draining their life force, but they didn’t know how. They were too afraid to touch any of them.

“Why are there empty beds?” Nibs asked.

“Because they died,” said a voice that didn’t belong to Red or the Lost Boys.

They looked around the basement to see where it was coming from. Propped up in the corner of the basement was a tall mirror with a silver frame, and to Red’s horror, Froggy was standing *inside of it*.

“Charlie!” Red yelled, and ran to it. She placed both of her hands on the glass and Froggy put his webbed hands against hers.

“Our dad’s a giant frog?” Nibs asked. *“Hooray, our dad’s a frog!”*

“Red, who are these children?” Froggy asked. “And why are they calling me *Dad*?”

“These are the Lost Boys of Neverland. I’ve adopted them for the time being—it’s a long story,” Red said. “Charlie, what are you doing inside a mirror?”

“Morina put me in here so I would have to watch the children,” Froggy said sadly.

“So how do we get you out?” Red asked.

Froggy shook his head. “Magic mirrors are irreversible, my darling” he said. “I’m trapped just like the Evil Queen’s lover, but since *the wishing spell* doesn’t exist anymore, I’ll most likely be in here… *forever*.”

Red fell to her knees and shook her head. She thought her heart was broken before, but it had shattered into so many pieces now, it might never heal again.

“No…,” she whispered. *“No, no, no…”*

Froggy became emotional at the sight of her. “I am so sorry, my love,” he cried. “You must take these children and leave before Morina gets back.”

“I can’t leave you…,” Red cried.

“There’s nothing we can do.” Froggy wept. “Morina wanted to separate us, and I’m afraid she has for good. *The witch has won*.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE SISTERS GRIMM

As far as Mrs. Campbell knew, Bree was spending the weekend at her friend Stacey's house. Even though Bree and Stacey hadn't been friends since the sixth grade, Mrs. Campbell was so excited her daughter was socializing again, she didn't ask many questions. Little did Mrs. Campbell know, after only a week free from being grounded, Bree was already planning another great excursion.

Naturally, she thought of calling Cornelia Grimm first, but her phone number wasn't listed in any directory Bree found. She had no choice but to go to 1729 Mystic Lane, Willow Grove, Connecticut, and pray Cornelia was still living there.

Bree planned the whole trip on her computer Thursday after school. She was so thankful for technology—she didn't know how kids managed to run away before the Internet. She found the address of the sourdough factory the Storybook Grill bought from. Willow Grove was only a bus ride away, and Cornelia's house was roughly an hour's walk from the center of town.

Friday morning, Bree packed her bag with snacks and an extra change of clothes. As soon as the school bell rang, she sprinted to the Storybook Grill and waited behind the Dumpster in the back. Just like Iris had said, the delivery truck for Sam's New England Sourdough arrived that afternoon.

The deliveryman was young and round and wore a white uniform with a red bow tie. He raised the back door of his truck and loaded a cart with boxes of bread. He rolled the cart down a ramp off the truck and into the diner.

He took his time once he was inside. Bree peeked in the window and saw him flirting with Petunia. Bree figured this was her chance to sneak aboard the delivery truck. She found a small space behind a stack of damaged boxes and hid there.

The deliveryman returned twenty minutes later and locked the truck up, clueless of the additional passenger. He started the engine, pulled away from the Storybook Grill, and headed back to the factory. Bree was on her way to Connecticut with no plan of how she would return.

It took two days for the truck to reach the northeastern state. The deliveryman stopped occasionally to eat and rest, but he was very determined to make it back in good time. Bree even heard him lying to a dispatcher about his estimated time of arrival.

The worst part about Bree's journey was sneaking on and off the truck to find a restroom. She waited until the deliveryman was either asleep in the backseat or eating in a restaurant. Every time she left the truck she was terrified it would be gone when she returned.

Despite it being a stressful and cramped way to travel, it still gave Bree quite a thrill. She hadn't had such an adrenaline rush since she traveled around Europe with Conner. She just wished he were with her to keep her company.

Finally, on Sunday morning the truck pulled into the Sam's New England Sourdough factory. As soon as the truck was parked Bree raised the backdoor from the inside and darted out.

"Thanks for the ride!" she said as she passed the deliveryman.

"Hey! How long have you been in there?" he yelled after her. "Come back here!"

He was too slow to chase after her, and Bree ran to the nearest bus stop. She waited only a few minutes for the next bus to arrive. The bus drove into the small and quiet city of Willow Grove and dropped her off in the center of town.

She pulled a map she had printed out of her bag and followed it a little ways out of town, heading for Cornelia's house. The Connecticut countryside was a beautiful place for a walk. There were rolling hills of green trees all around her as far as she could see.

Bree eventually found Mystic Lane. It was a wide residential street with large homes on spacious lots. All the houses were elegant but old. Some looked like they had been there since before the United States was formed.

"1723… 1725… 1727…" Bree read the addresses as she passed them. "Which brings us to *1729*!"

The house had a tall hedge around its yard, making it much more private

than all the other homes on the street. Bree went through a small gate and stepped onto the front lawn. It was a large two-story house with big windows and a wide front porch. The house was painted yellow and the front yard was covered in ornaments. There were colorful wind chimes, garden gnomes, birdbaths, and statues of fairies spread throughout the flowerbeds.

It was very homey and Bree felt very comfortable here—strangely comfortable.

“This must be it,” she said to herself.

Bree pulled out the old photograph of her grandmother and Cornelia. She held it up to the house and sighed with relief—it matched perfectly, like an old piece in a new puzzle. The house had been fixed up over the years, but Bree was definitely in the right place.

She walked up the porch steps and knocked on the door. Bree’s heart was racing. She prayed she hadn’t traveled so far for nothing.

A middle-aged woman with spiky red hair answered the door. She wore a maroon sweater and dangling ruby teardrop earrings.

“May I help you?” she asked.

“Hello, my name is Bree Campbell. I was wondering if a woman named Cornelia Grimm still lived at this address.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I think we’re cousins,” Bree said. “I was hoping she could answer a few questions for me about our family. I’m sorry to barge in like this, but I didn’t know how else to track her down. I’ve traveled a really long way to get here.”

“Yes, Cornelia’s here,” she said. “Come in, I’ll get her for you. My name is Wanda.”

They shook hands and Wanda escorted Bree inside. Her spirits soared knowing Cornelia was still alive—her journey hadn’t been a waste.

The house had floral wallpaper and white trim. There were large vases of flowers placed on every surface. The walls were covered in framed photos, and not a single frame was alike. Each picture was of a different woman or groups of women who had lived at the house over the decades. Bree recognized one of the women immediately.

“That’s my grandmother,” Bree said. She showed Wanda the picture of Cornelia and her grandmother.

Wanda smiled at her. “Oh, you’re Anneliese’s granddaughter,” she said. “Cornelia will be thrilled you’ve come to visit. Follow me, she’s in the sitting room.”

They entered a room filled with large comfy furniture. There were at least six cats that Bree counted, but she assumed there were probably more in other parts of the house. Another middle-aged woman was sitting on a couch reading a book. She was plump and had dark hair that was graying at the temples.

“Frenda, this is Bree Campbell,” Wanda introduced. “Bree, this is my cousin Frenda—Cornelia’s daughter.”

“Hello there,” Frenda said, surprised by the company.

“Hi,” Bree said, and shook her hand.

“Aunt Cornelia, you have a visitor,” Wanda said. “This is Bree Campbell—she’s Anneliese’s granddaughter.”

Cornelia Grimm was seated in the back of the room. She faced an easel and was in the middle of painting a landscape of some kind. She turned to face the girls and Bree instantly recognized her; she was very old now but still looked similar to her grandma’s picture. She had long white hair down to her waist. She wore red-framed glasses, and a stylish silk scarf was wrapped around her neck.

Cornelia was delighted to meet Bree. She retrieved her cane and stood to greet her.

“Hello, child,” Cornelia said with a sweet smile. “What a lovely surprise. I was just thinking about your grandmother this morning.”

“I’m so happy to finally meet you,” Bree said. “You’re my grandmother’s cousin, is that right?”

“Yes,” Cornelia said. “We were very close when we were young, but unfortunately lost touch over the years. Is she well?”

“Actually, she passed away a few years ago,” Bree was sad to share.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Cornelia said with a sigh. “Well, she’s in a better place now. What brings you to the house?”

Bree hesitated, not sure how to put it. “I found a letter you wrote to my grandmother with this address,” she said. “I have a lot of questions about our family, and since she’s not around anymore, I was hoping you could answer them for me. I would have just called, but you aren’t listed anywhere.”

“I hate solicitors,” Cornelia said. “We would be happy to answer any questions you have. Let’s have a seat.”

Cornelia sat beside Frenda on the couch. Bree and Wanda took the chairs across from them. The women were all ears and Bree could tell they were eager to hear what questions she had. It wasn’t every day that a young woman appeared on their doorstep seeking their help.

“I suppose I should just start with the biggest question on my mind,” Bree said. “Grimm isn’t a common name, so I was wondering if our family was related to the Brothers Grimm.”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Cornelia said. “Wilhelm Grimm was Anneliese and my fourth-great-grandfather.”

Once again, Bree’s spirits soared so high, she could have levitated into the air. This was the answer she was hoping to get—everything made sense now.

“That’s incredible,” Bree said with relief. “Are you from Germany as well?”

“My grandparents moved to the United States when they were young, but your grandmother was the first in her family,” Cornelia explained. “Before she met your grandfather she came to live with us in this house.”

“I figured as much from the letters,” Bree said. “I noticed all the photos of women in the hall. Was this house some kind of sorority?”

“Sort of,” Cornelia said. “The house first belonged to my mother and her sisters. Many of our relatives have lived here over the years and a strong majority of them were women. I’m sure our neighbors have thought we were a *coven* from time to time.”

Cornelia, Frenda, and Wanda all shared a laugh, but Bree didn’t join them. Instead, she eyed the women nervously.

“*Are* you witches?” Bree asked in all seriousness.

The room went very quiet. The women shared a look that gave Bree an unsettling feeling. There was definitely a secret among them.

“Sorry, I hope that wasn’t rude,” Bree said. “Whatever you are, it’s none of my business. Recently, I learned a lot about the Brothers Grimm—more than most people would believe. I know the Grimm family has *capabilities* that other families don’t.”

“Are you talking about the magic in our family’s blood?” Cornelia asked.

The hairs on Bree's arms suddenly stood up.

"Yes," she said. "You know about that?"

All three women nodded.

"It's a story that's been passed down in our family from generation to generation," Frenda said. "The Brothers Grimm didn't write the stories they published, but were given to them by fairies from another world. In the early nineteenth century, the Grande Armée caught wind of this world and tried to conquer it. So a fairy transferred magic from her blood into Wilhelm Grimm's so that he could help the fairies trap the approaching army. That magic still runs through our family's veins to this day."

"It's not enough magic to cast a spell or an enchantment," Wanda said. "But we know it's inside of us somewhere, and it separates us from everyone else in the world."

Bree stared at them in shock. She thought she was the only person in the Otherworld who knew the story.

"I'm curious how you knew the family secret before you knew you were in the family," Cornelia said with a laugh. "After your grandmother left this house, she was very adamant that she wouldn't tell her future children—magic always frightened her. I'm assuming she changed her mind but left out some of the details in her explanation."

"No," Bree said. "She never said a word about it; I found out completely on my own. It's a long story, but last year I went into the fairy-tale world."

The women gasped and sat on the edge of their seats. This was a game changer, even for them. Bree was the first person they had ever known who traveled into the fairy-tale world.

"You crossed over?" Wanda asked.

"But how?" Frenda asked.

Bree told her relatives all about her trip to Germany with her school, and her adventures with Conner and Emmerich. She told them how they traveled into the fairy-tale world through a portal inside Neuschwanstein Castle. She explained that once she returned to the Otherworld, she remembered hearing that Mother Goose had rigged the portal to trap any person of non-magic blood inside it for two hundred years. Having magic in their blood was the only explanation of how Emmerich and Bree traveled through the portal so effortlessly—which led Bree to believe she and Emmerich were descendants of Wilhelm Grimm.

It was a long-winded answer, but the women were completely captivated.

“How is your friend Conner related to magic?” Cornelia asked.

“He and his twin sister are the Fairy Godmother’s grandchildren,” Bree said.

“Fascinating,” Frenda said.

“Tell me about it!” Bree said. “They were the first children born of both worlds, and their birth somehow connected the two. Apparently, time in the fairy-tale world used to run a lot slower, but now the worlds are in sync.”

“How old are they?” Cornelia asked.

“Almost fifteen, I think,” Bree said. “What does that have to do with anything?”

None of them answered her. Knowing the twins’ ages sent Cornelia, Frenda, and Wanda deep into thought.

“I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me,” Bree said.

All three women suddenly stood.

“I think we should show Bree the guesthouse,” Cornelia said. “It’ll be easier to explain *the sisterhood* there.”

“The *sisterhood*?” Bree asked.

“Follow us, sweetheart,” Wanda said.

The women escorted Bree through the house and into the backyard. The lawn behind the house was just as decorated as the front lawn. There was a large guesthouse in the very back of their property. It looked like it may have been a barn before it was renovated.

They went through the door and Cornelia flicked on the lights. The guesthouse was one enormous room with a high ceiling. There was a large steel table in the very center and a row of desks in the back equipped with computers, printers, and radio scanners. There was a wall lined with file cabinets and several built-in drawers and cupboards. A giant map of the world took up another wall, and hundreds of locations were pinned with colorful tacks.

Bree looked around the room with large curious eyes. “What is this place, your secret laboratory?” she asked. “Are you secret agents or something?”

“We call ourselves *the Sisters Grimm*,” Cornelia said. “Our sisterhood was founded in 1852 by my third-great-grandmother, Maria Grimm. For

almost two centuries, the women in our family have monitored magical phenomena that occur in this world."

"What *magical phenomena*?" she asked. "Are you talking about the fairies that spread stories?"

"That and much more," Frenda said.

"For a long time, our family believed we were the only people on earth who had been exposed to magic and knew of the fairy-tale world," Cornelia explained. "However, we were wrong. When Maria Grimm took a closer look at history, she found our world's past is littered with instances where the two worlds have intersected. The fairies who spread stories were just *one* of those instances."

"But Conner's grandmother was the first and only person capable of creating portals between worlds," Bree said.

"According to our records and research, that isn't true," Cornelia said.

Wanda pulled down a large scrim. It was a time line stretching back thousands and thousands of years, covering every era of known history.

"We know the Fairy Godmother first showed up in this world somewhere in the early Dark Ages," Wanda explained, and pointed to the middle of the time line. "However, there is evidence of crossover between worlds long before she showed up."

"Most ancient civilizations were influenced by creatures that are considered *mythical* today," Frenda said. "The ancient people paid tribute to these beings in their art, stories, and sometimes even worshipped them. Despite the obvious presence of these creatures, historians have labeled their existence as *mythology*—simply because they don't meet the biological standards of animals today."

"Ancient Asia was majorly influenced by *dragons*, Europe is crawling with legends of *fairies* and *trolls* living in its forests, the Vikings claimed to witness *merpeople* as they sailed across the oceans, and that's only naming a few," Wanda said. "Ironically, all these creatures existed in the fairy-tale world at one point in time."

"It's more than just a coincidence, don't you think?" Cornelia said.

"So you're saying thousands of years ago these creatures slipped through the cracks of the fairy-tale world and wound up in our world?" Bree asked.

"Precisely," Cornelia said. "But it didn't end there. Let's show Bree the

carcasses.”

They walked Bree to the built-in drawers and cupboards. Wanda pulled open the biggest drawer at the bottom and Bree screamed. Inside was the skeleton of a mermaid.

“This was found on a Mexican beach in 1938,” Wanda said. “And *these* were found in Ireland in 1899.”

She opened the drawer above it and showed Bree four metal trays with small fairy skeletons taped to them.

“Luckily, whenever remains are found, most people think they’re fake,” Wanda said.

“So how are these things getting into our world?” Bree asked.

“During Maria Grimm’s research, she determined that, roughly once a month, somewhere in the world a *doorway* opens to the fairy-tale world,” Cornelia said. “It lasts only a few seconds. Sometimes people and creatures slip through, sometimes not.”

“Since Maria learned this, every time a doorway opens, the Sisters Grimm have been present to make sure no harm comes to anyone,” Frenda said. “If someone or something enters our world, we keep it until the next doorway appears, and do our best to release it back into the fairy-tale world.”

“Occasionally a creature gets loose from us,” Wanda said. “Perhaps you’ve heard of a few? There’s a harmless water dragon living in Scotland that people call the Loch Ness Monster. A family of hairy ogres has made a happy home in the mountains of North America and Nepal—but you might know them better as Sasquatches or yetis.”

“How do you know *where* the doorways will appear?” Bree asked.

“We’ve used the most powerful force of our world to predict the locations of the magical occurrence,” Cornelia said. “Science!”

Frenda picked up a yardstick and pointed to the tacks pinned to the large map of the world.

“We’ve marked the locations of every recorded sighting of a doorway or a magical being that’s entered from one,” Frenda said. “Notice the pattern?”

Bree studied the map, titling her head to view it differently. “If you connect the dots, it looks like the locations make a perfect spiral around the world,” she said.

“Exactly!” Wanda said. “That’s how we know where the next doorway

will open.”

“And a new doorway appears every month?” Bree asked.

“Like clockwork,” Cornelia said. “Until fifteen years ago, that is. We were waiting at the location of the next doorway, but it never appeared.”

“Why?” Bree asked.

“Because something happened fifteen years ago. Perhaps it was because your friends Alex and Conner were born,” Cornelia said. “Let’s show her the diagram.”

Wanda turned off the lights and Frenda pointed a remote at the ceiling. Bree looked up and saw a large diagram she hadn’t noticed before. It lit up and came to life. There were two small orbs, one blue and one green, circling around a large yellow orb. It looked like two earths orbiting the sun. However, the blue orb was circling the sun much faster than the green one.

“Pretend the two dimensions are planets circling the sun,” Cornelia said. “The green one is the fairy-tale world and the blue one is our world. Even though they move at different speeds somewhere in the cosmos, every so often their orbit crosses and they collide.”

The blue orb suddenly smashed into the green one. A few moments later it happened again. It repeated until Frenda paused the diagram with the remote.

“We believe the Fairy Godmother was born during the exact moment of a past collision, giving her the ability to move between worlds at will,” Wanda said.

“The Fairy Godmother told the Brothers Grimm that the fairy-tale world moved much slower than ours, and that information has been passed through our family since,” Cornelia said. “That’s why the doorways last only a second to us, but they may last hours or days in the fairy-tale world.”

Cornelia nodded to Frenda and she hit another button on the remote. The orbs started moving around the sun at the same speeds.

“We figured something had caused the worlds to move at similar speeds when the doorway never showed up fifteen years ago,” Frenda said. “But just because the worlds are moving at similar speeds doesn’t mean they won’t collide again and form another doorway.”

The green and blue orbs bumped into each other, and the moment of impact lasted much longer now that they circled at the same speed.

“On the contrary, we’re certain another doorway will form,” Cornelia said. “But this time it’ll stay open much longer, giving the people and creatures of both worlds plenty of time to travel between them.”

“When do you think it’ll happen?” Bree asked.

“Because the time difference between the worlds was never fully understood, we can’t make an accurate estimate,” Wanda said. “But based on the information we do know, we’ve created a chart that predicts it’ll happen within the next six months.”

“And where will the doorway appear?” Bree asked.

The women shared a distressed look.

“In the middle of New York City,” Cornelia said.

They had definitely done the research to support their theory, but Bree had a hard time embracing it. An open doorway to the fairy-tale world in the middle of one of the biggest cities on the planet would cause pandemonium!

Connecticut offered Bree more information than she ever dreamed.

“This is a lot to digest,” she said. “Excuse me for a moment. I need to call my friend Emmerich and fill him in.”

She took her phone out of her pocket. She had a dozen missed calls from her mother—Mrs. Campbell must have figured out Bree wasn’t at Stacey’s house. Bree ignored the calls and dialed Emmerich’s number.

“Hello?” Bree said into the phone. “Fraulien Himmelsbach? This is Bree Campbell, Emmerich’s friend.… Yes, the American one.… Yes, *that* American.… I am so sorry for calling so late, but… Fraulien Himmelsbach, I think we have a bad connection, because you sound like you’re crying.… What happened?… Where’s Emmerich?… *Can you repeat that?*”

Bree turned white as a ghost and sat on the floor. Her hands began trembling so much, she could barely hold the phone to her ear.

“Bree, what’s wrong?” Cornelia asked.

“It’s my friend Emmerich…,” she said with wide, frightful eyes. “He’s been kidnapped!”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE UNEXPECTED GOOD-BYE

Alex barely slept for the two weeks she was trapped in the world of *King Arthur.* Each day she was separated from her brother, her friends, and the fairy-tale world, the more she worried about them. The few hours she managed to doze off were only filled with nightmares of the same worries. She couldn't get the image of innocent people screaming and running for their lives as a flying *Jolly Roger* destroyed their homes out of her mind.

It was a complete blessing she had Arthur to distract her, otherwise her helplessness may have driven Alex insane. In fact, the time she spent with him felt like a two-week-long dream—and like all good dreams, Alex didn't want to wake from it.

The more time they spent together, the more they enjoyed each other's company. Alex felt closer to Arthur after just two weeks than to anyone else she had ever known. After every kiss, affectionate glance, and loaded smile, Alex felt the need to remind Arthur she would be leaving soon—but nothing could stop their growing attachment.

There were times when Alex daydreamed about staying in Arthur's world. What if she pretended the fairy-tale world and the Otherworld didn't exist? Could the fairy-tale world defeat her uncle's army without her? Could she live with the guilt of abandoning her friends and family? Alex was ashamed to even think about it; she knew it wasn't a possibility.

They spent every night together on the hill as the potion soaked in the moonlight. Usually, they fell asleep apart but by morning awoke in each other's arms. However, on the night before her departure, Arthur wasn't shy about cozying up next to her.

"You know, I'm leaving tomorrow," Alex said.

"I know," Arthur said. "But I'm going to pretend tonight lasts forever."

"Forever sounds nice," she said.

It was the first night she didn’t have nightmares. Instead, the dream she lived during the day continued through the night as she slept.

The morning arrived much sooner than she was expecting. Alex awoke and realized Arthur wasn’t lying beside her. She sat up and looked around the hill, but there was no sign of him.

“Arthur?” Alex called, but there was no answer.

She gathered the potion and searched the woods nearby, but couldn’t find him anywhere. Alex found it very odd that Arthur would leave her on the hill alone. She headed back to Merlin’s cottage with hopes of finding him there. Mother Goose and Lester were the only ones at the cottage when she arrived.

“Morning,” Mother Goose said. “Is the potion ready?”

“It should be after a zap of magic,” Alex said. “Have you seen Arthur? I can’t find him.”

“Merlin took him into the woods earlier for another lesson,” she said. “But I’m glad I caught you alone. I have something to tell you.”

Mother Goose had a seat at the table and gestured for Alex to sit with her. Whatever it was, it must have been serious.

“What’s wrong?” Alex asked.

Mother Goose took a deep breath and then let it out. “I’m not going back to the fairy-tale world with you,” she said. “I’m staying in this world with Merlin.”

This was the last thing Alex expected to hear. She was practically whiplashed by the news.

“What?” Alex said. “Mother Goose, you can’t stay here!”

“I’ve got to follow my heart on this one, kiddo,” Mother Goose said. “It’s taken me centuries to find the place I belong. It’s not the Otherworld, it’s not the Fairy Palace, it’s not the giant’s castle—it’s right *here* with Merlin.”

“I think this is very impulsive,” Alex said. “I know you’ve been lonely since my grandmother died, but you shouldn’t uproot to another dimension to be with someone you just met two weeks ago.”

Mother Goose chuckled.

“You know what’s funny? That’s the exact answer I was expecting to give you if you wanted to stay here with Arthur. I prepared a long list of reasons why it would be a bad idea. *You can’t stay! People are depending*

on you at home! You have your whole life ahead of you! Then I realized none of those things applied to me—so why wasn't I staying?"

"That isn't true," Alex said. "My brother and I both need you—we need your help stopping our uncle's army!"

"Having an old lady tagging along isn't going to help," Mother Goose said. "I'm good for a wisecrack now and then, but I can't defeat your uncle or his army—only you and your brother can do that. The minute you need me, I'll be there in a flash."

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Alex asked. "You were just telling me you wanted a new adventure—this sounds like you're settling down."

"Merlin *is* my next adventure," she said. "I've never known someone who makes me excited just to wake up in the morning. I don't look at the world and feel useless anymore, because I know I mean the world to him. He's lived as long as I have, made just as many mistakes, and still has all his original teeth—I'm never going to find another man like him! I probably sound like an old loon, but one day you'll understand. When you meet the person you're meant to be with, everything changes—you don't feel like you're fighting the world alone anymore."

Everything she described was exactly how Alex felt about Arthur. Perhaps Alex didn't have to wait until she was older to understand—she would have given anything to have the option of staying. As difficult as it would be to live without her, she could see in Mother Goose's eyes that she had finally found contentment. Any reason Alex had to argue with her decision was purely selfish.

"What about Lester?" Alex asked.

"I want you to take him," Mother Goose said. "I love him like he hatched from an egg I laid myself, but I drive him crazy. I already talked to him and he agrees it's for the best. You'll be good for each other."

"I can't say I'm happy about this," Alex said. "But I *am* happy for *you*."

"Thanks, kiddo," Mother Goose said. "I'm happy, too. *Very happy*."

Alex held her hand and smiled. Merlin entered the cottage and kissed Mother Goose's cheek, but he was alone.

"Good morning, ladies!" he said.

"Where's Arthur?" Alex asked.

Merlin had a seat and let out a heavy sigh. "Arthur has asked me to send

you his best wishes, but he won't be joining us this morning. He said saying good-bye would be too difficult."

"Oh…," Alex said quietly. It broke her heart a little knowing she wouldn't get a proper good-bye, but she couldn't blame him. "Well, in that case, I should finish the potion and go home."

Alex placed the potion in the center of the table. She pointed to it and a bright flash of light shot out of the tip of her finger and into the cauldron. The potion bubbled for a few moments and turned blue—the same shade as the bottle her uncle had stolen. The Portal Potion was finally finished.

"Here, put the potion in this," Mother Goose said, and handed Alex the flask she kept in her bonnet. "It'll be something to remember me by."

Alex carefully transferred the potion into the flask. She put the page from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* on the floor and poured three drops of the potion on it. The page lit up like a spotlight and a beam of light shined toward the ceiling.

Alex gave Merlin and Mother Goose a hug good-bye. It was difficult letting her go.

"This is it," Alex said. "Oz, here I come."

She edged toward the beam but stopped just before she took a step inside. She was paralyzed.

"What's wrong, Alex?" Mother Goose asked. "Is there something wrong with the potion?"

"No, there's something wrong with *me*," Alex said. "I can't leave without saying good-bye to Arthur. I've got to find him!"

Before Mother Goose or Merlin could respond, Alex dashed out of the cottage and headed into the woods. As if her heart were a magnet being pulled to his, she ran through the trees knowing exactly where to find him. She stepped into the clearing he took her to the day they met and Alex found Arthur sitting by the sword in the stone.

Arthur was shocked to see her; he expected she would be gone by now. His face lit up once he saw her and they stared at each other in silence while Alex caught her breath.

"You're still here," Arthur said.

"Did you really think I would leave without saying good-bye?" Alex said.

Arthur shrugged. "I was hoping if I didn't say it, it wouldn't be true."

“I wish it weren’t,” Alex said. “Believe me.”

Arthur got to his feet and stood as close to her as he could without touching. “Let me go with you,” he said desperately.

“Arthur, you know I can’t,” Alex said. “We both have our separate destinies to live. The people of this country need you. I’m not your future, England is.”

“If you believe that, then why did you find me here?” Arthur asked. “Why not just leave and forget about me?”

“I couldn’t leave without seeing your face again.”

Arthur smiled. “Because you know in your heart we belong together.”

“No, because I know in my heart you are meant to be king and I will only distract you,” she said. “If you won’t say good-bye, then I will. I don’t want you spending your life waiting for me to return. You’re meant to do great things, and I won’t keep you from them.”

“I don’t think I am,” he said quietly. “I’ll be worthless without you.”

“But you won’t be without me,” Alex said. “I’ll be reading every page of your story and I’ll be with you every step of the way. When you pull the sword from the stone, when you establish Camelot, when you create the Round Table, when you search for the Holy Grail—I’ll be there and I’ll know you’re doing it all *for me*.”

“But what if we’re in *your* story?” Arthur asked. “Perhaps this is all just a chapter in a book about you. Maybe someone is reading it right now in a world far away, and they know you’re making a mistake. You said yourself that there are versions of me—so let *this* version be with you. Let another Arthur somewhere else fulfill the legend.”

“But I’ll always feel like I’m doing something wrong,” Alex said. “Maybe after you’ve completed your story and I’ve completed mine, we can have a happy ending. But that’s several chapters ahead of us. *Good-bye* , Arthur—I’ll always treasure our time together.”

Alex turned away from him, but he quickly grabbed her hand.

“I know I’m more than just a story to you,” Arthur said. “And I have proof—the lock and key I gave you for the potion was from *my* door. It wouldn’t work unless you cared about me.”

Alex didn’t know what to say, so she said nothing. She pulled her hand out of his and left the clearing. As Alex walked away, she realized leaving Arthur was the hardest thing she would ever have to do. It was worse than

defeating the Enchantress, battling the Grande Armée, and chasing her uncle through literary dimensions—this time Alex was fighting her heart.

Conner's final days in Nottingham were utterly exhausting. He and the Merry Men, with the help of the Tin Woodman and Peter, searched every corner of Sherwood Forest for someone of magical capability. Their candidates were scarce and very much like the Witch of Papplenick: They all proved to be misunderstood or just total frauds.

After they'd searched for two long weeks, the Portal Potion had soaked up all the moonlight it required. It just needed the one final ingredient to be complete. Everything depended on Conner now. Only *he* could successfully activate the potion by accessing the magic within himself—he just wished he knew how to do it.

Little John and Peter brought the potion down from the treetops and set it in the middle of camp. Conner nervously paced in front of it and bit his nails—he had no idea how he was going to pull it off. All the men gathered around and watched him think it over.

"Well, are you going to do it?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"Does it look like I have a choice?" Conner said.

"How are you going to do it?" Peter asked.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out!" he snapped.

"THE SORCERER IS FRUSTRATED," Robin Hood announced.

"Can you guys all look away for a second?" Conner asked. "I can't concentrate when I'm being watched."

The men did as he requested, but still glanced over their shoulders now and then when he wasn't looking—they didn't want to miss anything.

Conner closed his eyes and tried to find the magic within, but he didn't know where to look. His sister always said magic was in her heart—but girls usually referred to their hearts when they talked about everything. Maybe Conner's magic existed in his head or his stomach? His left knee hurt a little today—was *that* where his magic was?

What was magic supposed to feel like, anyway? Was it a physical or an emotional sensation? Was it like a parasite crawling inside of him, or like the sadness that crept up whenever he saw a dog die in a movie?

Everything always came easily to Alex, and magic was no exception. He wished it were like telling a joke or writing a story—those were things Conner was good at.

"Wait, maybe that's it," he said to himself. "Maybe magic is different for everyone. Maybe it's what you *want* it to be—I mean, it is *magic* after all."

Conner tried summoning his magic like he summoned his creativity. It started in his *imagination*, not his heart. He visualized magic as an idea for a new story. He let it excite him, inspire him, and flow through his body until it was ready to be expressed.

"Okay, here goes nothing," he said. "I apologize if this ends horribly."

The Merry Men, the Tin Woodman, and Peter all braced themselves as Conner took a deep breath and pointed his finger at the potion.…

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ANOTHER MOON, ANOTHER MIDNIGHT

Another full moon shined on the Dwarf Forests, and at midnight, the witches of the fairy-tale world assembled at Dead Man's Creek on the wreckage of their former headquarters. Gargoylia led the gathering from the tallest pile of debris.

"The gods have smiled upon us, sisters," Gargoylia preached. "When we last met, we feared a witch hunt was in our future—but that fear can now be put to rest. Recently, great forces have descended through the kingdoms, stripping power from the hands of man and the fairies. Those who would have hunted us are now being hunted themselves!"

Rat Mary was among a small group who hadn't heard the news. "What kind of forces do you speak of?"

Witches throughout the crowd were eager to share what they witnessed.

"I *sssaw* a fleet of *sssoldiersss* attack the *Eassstern* Kingdom," Serpentina hissed. "They were tall and *sssquare*—bore *numbersss* and *sssymbolsss* on their armor!"

"The Corner Kingdom was pillaged by a flock of winged monkeys!" Tarantulene said.

"An army of men and women in yellow armor charged into the Charming Kingdom!" Charcoaline announced.

"Crows, wolves, and bees have taken over the Elf Empire," Arboris said. "And I've heard rumors of a flying ship that is holding the Northern Kingdom hostage!"

"Don't you see, sisters, it is the dawning of a new era!" Gargoylia said. "We have nothing to fear anymore—*the age of man and fairy is over!*"

The witches cheered, cackled, growled, and hissed in celebration—but their rejoicing was cut short.

“If you believe that, then you are fools!” said a voice from the forest.

The witches looked around the woods but didn’t see who it came from.

“Look! The water is changing!” Rat Mary said, and pointed to the creek.

The creek’s current started flowing in the opposite direction and Morina drifted in on a boat magically steering itself. Once the boat was docked, Morina stepped out and joined the gathering.

None of the witches had seen her in a long while and they were instantly intimidated by her presence. The witches parted out of her way as she climbed up the pile of wreckage to where Gargoylia was standing. A large bag containing a small body levitated out of the boat and floated behind her as she went—the witches couldn’t tell if the body was unconscious or dead.

“Why are you here, Morina?” Gargoylia said with a scathing look. “You haven’t been to a gathering in years.”

“I’ve never been impressed with the leadership,” Morina said. “Speaking of which, I think it’s time for a change—and I believe I’m the witch for the job.”

Gargoylia was outraged. The other witches could tell things were about to get ugly.

“How dare you!” Gargoylia yelled. “I’ve faithfully led this congregation for years! I will not be asked to step aside—especially by the likes of you!”

“No one *asked* you anything,” Morina said.

She raised a hand toward Gargoylia and the witch suddenly went as stiff as a board. Her stone skin cracked and chipped away until Gargoylia crumbled into nothing but a pile of rocks on the ground. The witches screamed and gasped in horror. It was the quickest way for Morina to gain the gathering’s attention and respect.

“The enemy of our enemy is not always our friend,” Morina told the witches. “These *forces* that have entered our world are led by the Masked Man—the same man you all rejected during your last gathering. Now he has recruited an unstoppable army without your help, and he will not forget the way you discarded him—he is ruthless and can hold a grudge for decades. Once he has wiped the kingdoms clean of the royal families and the fairies, it’ll be *our* extermination he calls for next—and none of us will survive it.”

The witches looked around nervously at one another. The only thing they were more afraid of than Morina was what she predicted.

“Then what can we do? Go into hiding?” Charcoaline asked.

Morina shook her head. “The answer is not to cower, but to *relocate*. I am tired of being a secondary race, forced to live from shadow to shadow, while others who outnumber us dictate and limit our way of life! It’s time to move to a place where we can be the supreme species! It’s time for our kind to travel into *the Otherworld!*”

“The Otherworld?” Rat Mary asked. “But that’s just a legend.”

“No, my sisters,” Morina said. “The Otherworld is very real. I have just returned from it and saw it with my own eyes. There are plenty of places for us to prosper, billions of people to rule over, and no one to stop us.”

The idea of such a world intrigued the witches—but they had their doubts.

“How do we get to the Otherworld?” Serpentina asked.

“There are portals hidden all over the world left by the late Fairy Godmother,” Morina said. “I found one in the woods of the Eastern Kingdom that the Grande Armée entered from, but given the white magic the Fairy Godmother used to create it, the portal weakened and exhausted me; I doubt many of *you* would survive it. But do not fear, for an easier route is coming! I foresaw in my crystal ball that the worlds are about to collide, and when they do, a grand doorway will form that will offer us easy access to the Otherworld.”

“But what about the Masked Man?” Arboris asked. “Wouldn’t he follow us and conquer the Otherworld for himself?”

“Luckily, I have planned for that,” Morina said.

The floating body fell to the ground and she removed the bag from it in one swift pull. It was a sleeping little boy with dark hair, pale skin, and rosy cheeks—*Emmerich Himmelsbach.*

“Behold, *the Masked Man’s son,*” Morina boasted. “Years ago, this child was hidden from his father before he even knew of the boy’s existence. If the Masked Man or his army should ever pose a threat to us, the child will be the perfect leverage to keep him at bay! Our salvation is upon us!”

Before the witches had a chance to question her further, the air was filled with a sudden chill coming from the north and a salty breeze coming from the south. It caught them off guard and they searched the trees for a sign of what was causing it.

The witches watched in amazement as a strong frost traveled down the

creek from the north and froze the water as it blew in. From the south, a strong tidal wave of murky ocean water flowed up the creek and flooded the bank. The frost and the wave met directly where the tavern used to stand.

From the north, two enormous polar bears pulled an ice sleigh down the frozen creek. They transported a tall woman with pale frostbitten skin. She wore a large fluffy white coat, a snowflake crown, and a cloth wrapped around her eyes.

From the south, four fins skimmed the creek's surface as a school of sharks swam through the water. An elaborate sled made of several types of coral surfaced behind the sharks. The creature aboard had scaly turquoise skin and seaweed hair. It had six legs and large claws, like the bottom half of the creature was a crustacean.

The legendary Snow Queen and infamous Sea Witch had arrived in style, and the witches were shocked to see them in person.

They stepped out of the creek and walked up the wreckage to where Morina stood. The Snow Queen was blind and used a long icicle to guide her, not caring whom she unintentionally struck with it. The Sea Witch stroked a cuttlefish resting in her arms and glared at the other women around the creek.

Morina may have intimidated the other witches, but they were terrified to be in the presence of the Snow Queen and Sea Witch. They bowed as they passed—even Morina gave a shallow nod.

"Your Excellences, what brings you to the woods tonight?" Morina asked with a quiver in her voice.

"You are not the first witch to see the Otherworld as a potential home, Morina," the Snow Queen growled in her raspy voice. "It has been a passion project of the Sea Witch and me for hundreds of years—but despite the approaching doorway, crossing over will not be as easy as you think."

"You underestimate the Otherworld," the Sea Witch hissed. "It is a world without magic, but a world that possesses technology far beyond your comprehension. They will use it against us the moment we try claiming their home as ours."

Morina didn't appreciate being publicly discredited.

"Have you come out of seclusion just to prove me wrong, or is there a way we can overcome the Otherworld's defenses?" she asked in a spiteful tone that made the other witches nervous.

Snide smiles grew across the Snow Queen's and the Sea Witch's faces.

"We must create a *weapon*," the Snow Queen said.

"Something the Otherworld won't stand a chance against," the Sea Witch hissed.

"What kind of weapon?" Morina asked.

"Not *what*, but *who*," the Snow Queen said. "Years ago, the Sea Witch and I almost succeeded in creating it. We cursed a very powerful fairy known as Ezmia, the late Fairy Godmother's former apprentice. The curse disturbed her emotions, causing her pain to intensify a thousand times stronger than anything else she felt. Tortured by heartbreak and overwhelmed with despair, she eventually became *the Enchantress* and wreaked havoc on the kingdoms."

"We put the idea of conquering *both* worlds into her head, and she spent the majority of her life attempting to," the Sea Witch hissed. "However, she was defeated by a fairy known as Alex Bailey, the late Fairy Godmother's granddaughter. Interestingly, Alex is a child of both worlds, and therefore has potential to be far more powerful than the Enchantress ever was. So the Snow Queen and I have set our sights on *her*."

"We put the same curse we cast on Ezmia on Alex," the Snow Queen said. "We watched it take hold of her just as it did Ezmia. As the young fairy searched the kingdoms for the Masked Man, she was consumed by anger, and lost control of her powers. We learned we were right—she was much more powerful than Ezmia, perhaps more powerful than any fairy who has ever lived. But with that power comes great strength, and the curse eventually faded."

"If she is too powerful for the curse, then how are we supposed to use her to vanquish the Otherworld?" Morina asked.

The Snow Queen and the Sea Witch turned away from Morina and faced all the witches at the gathering.

"The more witches who participate, the more powerful the curse becomes," the Sea Witch said. "By combining our magic, we can cast a curse on Alex Bailey so powerful, she'll never recover from it!"

"Together, we can transform the young fairy into the ultimate weapon," the Snow Queen said. *"She'll destroy the defenses of her former home, and the Otherworld will be ours!"*

Chapter Thirty

A WORLD AT STAKE

The words from the loose page spun through the air and created the world of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* around Alex and Lester. She saw the words *Emerald City* fly into the distance, and before the city was even fully formed, Alex hopped onto Lester's back and they flew into the west, all the while praying her friends would still be at the Wicked Witch's castle.

The words continued to construct the Winkie Country below them as they headed to the Wicked Witch of the West's castle. Alex and Lester circled the castle as it was generated from the ground up. They landed on the balcony just outside the throne room and Alex blasted the glass doors open with a bright flash.

"Goldilocks? Jack? Blubo?" Alex called, but all she heard was the echo of her own voice.

The throne room was completely deserted. Alex's anxiety rose, and she feared the worst. What if her uncle had traveled back through the stories and separated her friends, too? They may never find them. And without a book to travel home through, Alex may be stuck in Oz for a very long time.

A soft breeze blew from the empty room behind her. She turned around and saw a bright golden piece of paper appear out of thin air. The paper landed on the ground and a bright beam of light shined out of it. Seven silhouettes of all shapes and sizes stepped out of the beam.

The silhouettes vibrated like static on a broken television. Like the words of a recently entered story, the figures slowly gained color and texture, until Alex recognized one.

"CONNER!" Alex screamed.

"ALEX!" Conner yelled.

The twins were overjoyed to see each other. Alex ran across the throne room and leaped into his arms. They shared a massive hug until Conner

couldn’t hold her up any longer.

“I was afraid I would never see you again!” Alex said. She recognized the other silhouettes as they became solid. “Mr. Woodman! Peter! I’m so glad you’re all right! Wait—who are *they*?”

Conner was just as surprised to see the Merry Men had traveled into the castle behind him.

“Guys, what are you doing here?” he asked.

“WE COULDN’T LET OUR SORCERER TRAVEL INTO A STRANGE WORLD WITHOUT OUR PROTECTION!” Robin Hood said. “THE MERRY MEN WILL STAND BY YOUR SIDE UNTIL THE END!”

“Whatever.” Conner sighed—he didn’t have the patience to argue. “Alex, allow me to introduce you to Robin Hood and the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest.”

Alex couldn’t believe the historic outlaws were standing in front of her. She was a little starstruck.

“*The* Robin Hood?” she asked. “It’s so nice to meet you. I’ve read all about you!”

“THE PLEASURE IS ALL MINE, MY LADY!” Robin Hood said, and kissed her hand. “ANY SISTER OF THE SORCERER IS A SISTER OF MINE!”

“He’s so loud,” Alex whispered to her brother. *“Why does he call you sorcerer?”*

“It’s a long story, but I convinced them I’m a sorcerer,” Conner said.

“They aren’t the only ones he convinced,” the Tin Woodman said with a grin. “You should be very proud of your brother, Alex! He activated the Portal Potion all by himself!”

“You did?” Alex said with an excited smile. “Conner, that’s incredible! I’ve always told you there was magic somewhere inside you!”

Conner shrugged bashfully. “It wasn’t that big of a deal. The hardest part was figuring out how to channel it.”

Peter animatedly flew into the air. “You should have seen it, Alex! First Conner pointed at the potion and BOOM! *A spark blasted out of his finger!* Then the potion was like WHOOSH! *Ready when you are, Captain!* Then we poured it over the page and it was like BAAM! *Let there be light!*”

Alex was so proud of her brother, she almost burst with pride. “As soon

as I found the page I knew you'd find yours and create the potion, too."

"Great minds think alike," Conner said. "Well, I spent two weeks in Nottingham—where did our jerk of an uncle send you guys?"

"He sent us into *King Arthur*!" Alex said. "Conner, I met Merlin and Arthur! They helped me create the Portal Potion!"

"No way!" Conner said, but after his trip he didn't know why he was so surprised. "Where is Mother Goose?"

There was no way Alex could gently break the news to him, so she just came right out and said it. "She's decided to stay with Merlin. They sort of had a *thing*."

Conner looked back and forth between Alex and Lester in disbelief. Lester nodded, confirming it for him.

"Well, I didn't see that one coming," Conner said. "So is she gone for good?"

"I can fill you in on all the details later," Alex said. "Right now we've got to find Goldilocks and Jack—I don't think they're in the castle anymore."

"Alex, we've been gone for two weeks," he said. "I bet they traveled back into the fairy-tale world. Let's find the book."

They searched the throne room and Conner found the copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* placed neatly on the throne.

"They must have left this here in case we came back," Conner said. "Our uncle would have destroyed it like the books he sent us into."

"There's only one way to find out," Alex said.

The twins opened the book together and a strong beam of light emitted from it. The others gathered around them.

"Be careful, guys," Conner told them. "There's no way of telling what might be waiting on the other side of this."

One by one, the twins, the Merry Men, Lester, the Tin Woodman, and Peter stepped into the beam of light. As they traveled back into the fairy-tale world, Oz was stripped away word by word, description by description. The witch's castle peeled away and a cave was uncovered—the same cave their journey started from.

They heard several voices before they saw anyone. As the cave was revealed, the twins could see it was much more occupied than when they had left.

Jack and Goldilocks were sitting together on one side of the cave with Blubo perched on Jack's shoulder. The Lost Boys played with rocks in the back of the cave, while Red cradled an infant. She looked terrible and stared off into space.

It was late and the twins noticed campfires just outside the entrance of the cave. They saw soldiers from the Northern Kingdom and the Charming Kingdom sitting around them. Sir Grant and Sir Lampton were among them. Each face was longer than the next and they were all badly banged up.

Hagetta tended to the soldiers, setting their injuries ablaze with flames of her healing fire.

The cave was filled with so much despair, it could have been cut with a knife. Everyone looked as if they had been through their own versions of hell.

Finally, the twins and the others became visible to the people in the cave, officially returning from Oz. Everyone was ecstatic to see them, as if they had come back from the dead. Their friends and the soldiers got to their feet and ran to greet them.

"Alex! Conner! Thank God you're alive!" Goldilocks said, and embraced the twins. Her eyes were filled with tears, but Goldilocks wasn't hormonal, she was genuinely relieved.

Upon first glance at the soldiers, the Merry Men's knee-jerk reaction was to reach for their weapons.

"Don't worry, guys," Conner said. "We're all friends in this cave."

"PETER!" The Lost Boys cheered and jumped up and down when they saw him. Peter flew across the cave and let them form a ceremonious dog pile on top of him.

"Wait a second, where's Slightly?" Peter asked.

The Lost Boys pointed to the infant in Red's arms and filled him in on what had happened. Red was the only one who didn't greet the twins. She stayed seated and continued staring off—it was like she was in a trance.

"What happened to Red?" Conner asked.

"She tried rescuing Froggy from Morina and discovered the witch had imprisoned him in a magic mirror," Goldilocks said.

The twins gasped and covered their mouths.

"Unfortunately, that's the least of our worries," Jack said. "Your uncle

and the army have arrived."

"That's what we were afraid of," Conner said.

"Jack, tell us everything you know," Alex said.

Jack told the twins how he and Goldilocks returned to the fairy-tale world after a week of waiting for them in the castle. Around the same time, their uncle entered the world and began attacking the kingdoms. From what they knew, the army split up and each kingdom was attacked at the same time.

"We never saw it coming," Sir Grant recalled. "An enormous ship flew down from the clouds in the middle of the night and opened fire on the palace. There was barely anything left after the cannons were stopped. Pirates kidnapped King Chandler and Queen Snow White."

"The Charming Kingdom was stormed by an army of men and women in yellow armor," Sir Lampton said.

"Winkies," the Tin Woodman said fearfully.

"Heaven knows what they did with the royal family," Lampton said. "My men and I barely made it out of the kingdom alive. We found Sir Grant and his men in the Dwarf Forests and Jack found us there. We've been hiding out in this cave ever since."

The twins were taking deep breaths so they wouldn't become sick.

"What about the other kingdoms?" Conner asked.

"We assume the same has happened to them, but we haven't made contact," Jack said.

"And the fairies?" Alex asked.

"No one has heard from them, either, but it's possible they were hit first," Goldilocks said. "The first thing your uncle did when he arrived was free the prisoners from Pinocchio Prison—all the soldiers from the Grande Armée and the criminals that aided them are once again under his command."

Alex and Conner exchanged horrified looks—their biggest nightmare had become a reality.

"We need to get to the Fairy Kingdom and find the council," Alex said. "Conner and I will leave straightaway. Everyone needs to stay in the cave until they hear from us."

"You can't leave," Lampton said. "The Masked Man's army is everywhere—even the skies. There's no way you'll go undetected, even if

you fly that bird. ”

The twins glanced at Lester and he gulped.

“We won’t be traveling by land or sky,” Alex said. “I’ll transport us there magically.”

“Are you sure about that?” Conner asked. “Last time I suggested that, you had hesitations.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Alex said. “Come on, let’s not waste any more time.”

The twins embraced and Alex counted to three. They disappeared from the cave with a bright flash. Alex transported herself and her brother somewhere outside, but they weren’t exactly sure where. The air was filled with smoke and the ground was littered in debris.

“Conner, look!” Alex gasped and pointed into the distance. “It’s the Fairy Palace!”

The Fairy Palace was almost unrecognizable. Its trademark glow had faded away and most of it had been blown to smithereens. The gardens had been destroyed, too, and were covered in an ashy coat of dust. The statue that had been erected in their grandmother’s memory lay in pieces on the ground.

Alex and Conner both became teary-eyed at the sight. There was no sign of life anywhere—they hoped the fairies had fled in time to save themselves. But if the council had been inside the palace during the attack, it wasn’t likely.

“The Hall of Dreams… Grandma’s chambers… it’s all gone,” Alex cried.

“Let’s see if we can find anything or anyone inside,” Conner said.

They walked across the dusty earth and quietly climbed into the palace ruins. Everything was so damaged, they couldn’t tell what anything was anymore. The only room they could identify was the grand hall, and that was just because of its size.

As soon as Conner and Alex entered the hall, seven figures came into view, and the twins quickly dived behind a fallen pillar. The air was still hazy from the attack and they couldn’t see who or what the figures were.

“Alex, I don’t think they’re moving,” Conner said.

“You’re right, they’re not people, they’re *statues*,” she said. “That’s odd, there weren’t statues in the grand hall before.”

The twins walked deeper into the hall to have a closer look. The statues looked frightened and were awkwardly positioned as if they were trying to run from something. The longer the twins stared at the scared faces of the statues, the more familiar they became.

“Oh my God,” Conner said. “Alex, these aren’t statues—*it’s the council! They’ve been turned into stone!*”

Emerelda, Xanthous, Skylene, Tangerina, Rosette, Violetta, and Coral were hard to identify now that they were all the same color stone, but Conner was right. It was too much for Alex to bear. She ran to the side of the room and became sick.

“What could have done this?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Conner said, and rubbed her back.

“Alex? Conner?” said a little voice somewhere in the palace.

The twins saw something small hovering near a windowsill on the other side of the hall, and were relieved to see it was only Trix. She was covered in dust and her wings were mangled, making it difficult to fly.

“Trix, I’m so happy to see you!” Alex said.

“What happened here?” Conner asked.

“The palace was attacked by a flying ship,” she said.

“What turned the council into stone?” Alex asked.

“A horrible monster!” Trix said, and trembled at the thought of it.

“What kind of monster?” Conner asked.

“I didn’t see it,” Trix said. “I was so scared, I closed my eyes and hid, but Noodle and Merkle weren’t so lucky.”

Trix gestured to the windowsill and the twins saw that her friends had been turned to stone, too. Like the council, they also looked terrified and were positioned like it happened while they were trying to escape.

“Trix, what happened to the monster?” Conner asked.

“It left with the pirate ship.” Trix sniffled.

“And what happened to all the other fairies?” Alex asked.

“Some hid in the forest, but I’m not sure what happened to the others,” she said.

“Trix, I want you to hide in the forest, too,” Alex instructed. “Get away from here—find someplace to stay until it’s safe again. We’re going to figure something out.”

Trix nodded and flew off as fast as her wings could carry her.

“Conner, I think our uncle has recruited creatures beyond the realms of literature,” Alex said as she glanced around at the statues. “This looks like something from *mythology*. I don’t know how we’re going to stop him.”

Alex took a seat on the windowsill while Conner paced in front of her. They spent an hour in total silence as they tried to think of ways to save the fairy-tale world. Conner suddenly stopped in his tracks and looked up toward one of the only remaining towers of the palace.

“The south tower survived the attack,” he said to himself.

His eyes suddenly lit up and Alex knew an idea was forming in his head.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“I know how we can stop him,” he said excitedly.

“How?”

“By forming an army of our own,” Conner said. “Come on—follow me!”

Before she could question him further, Conner raced through the wrecked palace and found the stairs leading to the south tower. He sprinted up the steps and Alex chased after him. They entered a circular room at the top of the tower. It was covered in dust and cobwebs, and an empty archway stood in the middle of the room.

Conner searched the walls with his hands, feeling around for something.

“How are we supposed to form an army?” Alex asked.

“Exactly how our uncle did it,” he said. “We’ll travel into stories and recruit characters than can help us—and I know exactly which ones we’ll ask! Do you still have the Portal Potion on you?”

Alex retrieved the flask she had tucked into her waistband. “Yes, but—”

“Great!” Conner said. “We have to make a stop in the Otherworld first. I just need to find the—*oh , I found it!*”

He pulled a lever on the side of the wall and a blue curtain magically appeared in the archway. Alex could see a world of light behind it—the world she saw every time she traveled between the fairy-tale world and the Otherworld.

“Yes!” Conner said. “The portal still works! *Let’s go!*”

“I’m confused—why do we have to travel into the Otherworld?” Alex asked.

“Because that’s where the stories are,” he said.

“Which stories are you talking about?”

Conner paused just as he was about to step through the curtain. "*Mine,*" he said.

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Contents

COVER
TITLE PAGE
WELCOME
DEDICATION
EPIGRAPH

PROLOGUE: THE OTHER SON
CHAPTER ONE: THE WITCHES' BREW
CHAPTER TWO: "DO YOU ACCEPT THE CHARGES?"
CHAPTER THREE: THE UNGODMOTHERING
CHAPTER FOUR: GOOSE ON THE LAM
CHAPTER FIVE: POTIONS AND PREDICTIONS
CHAPTER SIX: THE BAD FAIRIES
CHAPTER SEVEN: ANSWERS IN THE ATTIC
CHAPTER EIGHT: THE ONLY OBJECTION
CHAPTER NINE: A MOTH OF MEMORIES
CHAPTER TEN: MAKING AMENDS
CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE CAVE
CHAPTER TWELVE: THE CYCLONE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE TIN WOODMAN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN: TROUBLE ON THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD
CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE WITCH'S CASTLE

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: DITCHING THE DARLINGS

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: ADVENTURES WITH THE LOST BOYS

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: MERMAID LAGOON

CHAPTER NINETEEN: DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE STORYBOOK GRILL

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: THE WIZARD AND HIS APPRENTICE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: THE MERRY MEN OF SHERWOOD FOREST

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: LOST ADVICE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE LADY OF THE LAKE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: THE WITCH OF PAPPLENICK

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: THE BASEMENT

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: THE SISTERS GRIMM

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE UNEXPECTED GOOD-BYE

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: ANOTHER MOON, ANOTHER MIDNIGHT

CHAPTER THIRTY: A WORLD AT STAKE

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The Land of Stories

An Author's Odyssey

CHRIS COLFER

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Illustrated by Brandon Dorman

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Begin Reading

Table of Contents

A Sneak Peek of *The Land of Stories: A Treasury of Classic Fairy Tales*

Copyright Page

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To Will,
for playing hours of How Do You Spell?, What's Funnier?, Would a Ten-Year-Old Understand It?, and other interactive games while I write. Thanks for being my secret weapon.

“A WRITER IS A WORLD TRAPPED IN A PERSON.”

—VICTOR HUGO

PROLOGUE

THE FAVORITE STUDENT

Willow Crest Unified School District spared no expense celebrating the retirement of a beloved principal. The community banquet hall was decorated so elegantly, there wasn't a trace of Senior Bingo from the night before. The tables were dressed with lacy tablecloths, floral centerpieces, and battery-operated candles. Each place setting had golden plates and more silverware than the guests knew what to do with.

Teachers, counselors, janitors, lunch ladies, and former students showed up in droves to say good-bye and wish the principal well. The retirement party was one of the classiest gatherings any of them had ever been to. However, as the guest of honor looked around at all the long faces, the occasion seemed more like a funeral than a celebration.

The newly appointed district superintendent tapped his champagne glass with a spoon and the hall became quiet.

"May I have your attention please?" he said into a microphone. "Good evening, everyone, I'm Dr. Brian Mitchell. As you know, we're here to celebrate one of the finest educators Willow Crest Unified School District has ever had the privilege of employing, Mrs. Evelyn Peters."

Her name was followed by a warm round of applause. A bright spotlight hit Mrs. Peters, who was seated at the front of the room beside Dr. Mitchell. She smiled and waved at the guests, but secretly she wished she had never agreed to the gathering. Special attention and compliments from her colleagues always made her uncomfortable, and tonight it was just getting started.

"I've been asked to say a few words about Mrs. Peters, which is very intimidating," Dr. Mitchell said. "It doesn't matter what I say, because rather than taking any praise to heart, I know she'll only be listening to my

speech for grammatical errors."

The guests laughed and Mrs. Peters hid a giggle behind her napkin. Anyone who knew her knew it was true.

"It's easy to say someone is good at their job, but I know for a fact that Evelyn Peters is an *incredible* educator," Dr. Mitchell said. "Nearly three decades ago, long before she became a principal, I was in her first sixth-grade class at Willow Crest Elementary School. Prior to meeting her, my childhood had been very difficult. By the time I turned ten, both my parents were in prison and I was bouncing in and out of foster care. When I stepped into Mrs. Peters's classroom I could barely read. Thanks to her, by the end of the year, I was reading Dickens and Melville."

Many of the guests clapped, making Mrs. Peters blush. Most of them had lived or witnessed similar stories.

"We did not get along at first," Dr. Mitchell said. "She pushed me harder than anyone ever had. She gave me extra homework and made me stay after school and read aloud to her. At one point, I was so tired of the special treatment, I threatened to graffiti her house if it didn't stop. The next day she handed me a can of spray paint and a card with her address and said, 'Whatever you write, just make sure it's spelled correctly.'"

The hall erupted with laughter. The guests looked to Mrs. Peters to confirm the story and she nodded coyly.

"Mrs. Peters taught me much more than just how to read," Dr. Mitchell said, and his voice began to break. "She taught me the importance of compassion and patience. She was the only teacher I felt cared about *me* as much as my grades. She got me excited to learn and inspired me to become an educator. We're very sad to see her go, but had she applied for superintendent instead of retiring, we all know I would *never* have been hired."

Mrs. Peters wiped her glasses to distract the guests from the tears forming in her eyes. Had it not been for this reception, she might never have acknowledged to herself all the differences she had made in so many lives.

"Now, please join me in a toast," Dr. Mitchell said, and raised his glass. "To Evelyn Peters, thank you for inspiring and teaching us all. Willow Crest Unified School District won't be the same without you."

Everyone in the hall raised their glasses to toast Mrs. Peters. When they

finished, Mrs. Peters took the microphone and raised her glass back at them.

"Now, please allow me to say a few words," she said. "My late husband was also a teacher, and he gave me the best advice one educator could give to another. So, I would like to pass it along to you in case this is my last chance."

Everyone in the hall sat on the edge of their seats, especially the teachers.

"As teachers, we must not guide our students to become the people *we wish them to be*, but elevate them to become the people *they were meant to be*. Remember, the encouragement we give our students may be the only encouragement they ever receive, so don't use it sparingly. After twenty-five years of teaching grammar school and my brief administration experience, I can assure you my husband was absolutely right. And since that is the best lesson I can teach you, I'll say for the last time, *class dismissed*."

The conclusion of her speech was met with a standing ovation. After a few moments of applause Mrs. Peters urged the guests to sit, but it only made them cheer louder for her.

The lights were dimmed and a screen was lowered. Dr. Mitchell and Mrs. Peters took their seats and watched as group photos of Mrs. Peters's classes were projected, starting with her very first sixth-grade class from almost thirty years before. As the slide show commenced, the former students laughed at their eleven-and twelve-year-old selves and the ridiculous hairstyles and clothes they had sported in earlier decades. Especially noted was how little Mrs. Peters had changed over the years. In every picture the educator's hair, glasses, and floral dresses were exactly the same. It was as if Mrs. Peters were frozen in time while the world changed around her.

The slide show made Mrs. Peters more emotional than anything else that night. It was like watching a family album flash before her eyes. She remembered the name of each face she saw. Most of the students she still knew personally or she knew what they had gone on to become, but there were a few she had lost contact with completely. It was a painful feeling to have been so close to a child at one point, then later to feel as if they had disappeared into thin air.

Mrs. Peters's students were the closest thing to children she had ever

had. She hoped they were all happy and healthy, wherever they were. If she was no longer a staple of compassion and guidance in their lives, she hoped they had found someone who was.

"Evelyn?" Dr. Mitchell whispered.

Mrs. Peters still found it strange for a former student to address her by her first name—even if he *was* the superintendent.

"Yes, Dr. Mitchell?" she whispered back.

"Did you ever have a favorite student?" he asked with a grin. "I know we're not *supposed* to have favorites, but is there one child who stands out to you? Besides me, of course."

Mrs. Peters had never thought about such a thing. She had taught over five hundred students in her career and remembered each for different reasons, but selecting a *favorite* had never been a priority.

"I definitely *enjoyed* some more than others, but I could never choose a favorite," she said. "That would require judgment, and I always thought judging a child is like judging an unfinished piece of art. Every child enters a classroom with his or her own set of obstacles to face, whether behavioral or academic. It's a teacher's job to identify those issues and help students overcome them, but never to belittle a student for them."

Dr. Mitchell had never thought of it that way. Even in adulthood, he was still learning a thing or two from Mrs. Peters.

"I may be a superintendent, but I'll always be your student," he said.

"Oh, Dr. Mitchell." Mrs. Peters laughed. "No one ever stops being a student in the classroom of life."

Even though she'd thought not answering was the best answer, Mrs. Peters quickly realized she was mistaken. A picture appeared on the screen of her final sixth-grade class, three years earlier. She scanned the faces of her former students and stopped at a pair of twelve-year-old twins named Alex and Conner Bailey.

Alex's hair was neatly tucked behind a pink headband, and she held a stack of books close to her heart. A large grin filled her face because school was her favorite place in the world. Her brother, on the other hand, was puffy eyed and his mouth hung open. He appeared to have just woken up from a nap and to have had no clue the photo was being taken.

Mrs. Peters laughed because they looked exactly as she remembered them, and the picture reminded her of how much she missed them.

Both of the Bailey twins had unexpectedly transferred schools before Mrs. Peters had a chance to say good-bye. Alex went to live with her grandmother in Vermont halfway through the seventh grade, and then Conner joined her the following year. Even though their mother still lived in town, Mrs. Peters had been assured they were better off with their grandmother.

As far as Mrs. Peters knew, Alex moved away to attend a school for advanced learners. But it was still a mystery as to why Conner had gone to join her.

The year before he moved, Conner had run off during a school trip in Europe with another student, Bree Campbell. The stunt seemed entirely out of character for both students, who had clean records up to that point. Had Conner stayed in Mrs. Peters's school, he would have been punished appropriately, as Bree had been, but Mrs. Peters never thought it warranted a transfer to another school district.

The entire situation was very suspicious and personally upsetting for Mrs. Peters. Conner had just discovered a natural talent for writing and was excelling in school for the first time. Wherever he was now, Mrs. Peters hoped Conner had found someone else to encourage him. To her, there was nothing worse in the world than a student's wasted potential.

The slide show ended and dessert was served in the banquet hall. After a dozen more complimentary speeches from former colleagues and students, the evening finally came to an end.

Mrs. Peters loaded her car with a stack of farewell cards and an armful of bouquets. She was looking forward to a quiet night at home so she could decompress from the long and emotional evening. On her way home, she unintentionally drove past Willow Crest Elementary School. Mrs. Peters slammed on her brakes and parked her car. The school reminded her of one more good-bye she had to make before officially retiring.

Mrs. Peters dug through her large purse to find the key to her old sixth-grade classroom. Luckily the locks hadn't been changed, and she entered room 6B without any trouble. But instead of feeling a wave of nostalgia like she expected, she hardly recognized the dark room.

The current teacher decorated very differently than Mrs. Peters had. The desks were arranged in groups instead of rows. The walls that used to hold shelves of dictionaries and encyclopedias were now lined with computers

and tablets. The posters of world-renowned authors and scientists had been replaced with posters of celebrities holding their favorite books—books Mrs. Peters wasn't convinced they had read.

Mrs. Peters felt like an actor stepping onto someone else's stage. She couldn't believe how much a classroom could change in such little time. It was as if she had never taught there at all. The only similarity was the teacher's desk, which was kept in the exact place Mrs. Peters had kept her desk for twenty-five years. The retiree sat in the chair behind it and looked around the classroom bittersweetly.

She hoped the decor wasn't an indication of anything other than the new teacher's taste. She hoped the same morals and values she had taught were still being shared in her absence. She hoped the new technology was enhancing those lessons, and not replacing them with lesser ideology. Most of all, Mrs. Peters hoped the new teacher *cared* about teaching as much as she did.

Before getting depressed about it, Mrs. Peters reminded herself she would have felt worse if there *hadn't* been any change. After all, it was thanks to teachers like her that the current generation was progressing so effortlessly into the future.

And just like all the teachers who had come before her, it was time for Mrs. Peters to pass the torch to her successors. She hadn't expected letting go would be so difficult.

"Good-bye, classroom," Mrs. Peters said. "I'll miss the lessons we taught together, but even more, I'll miss the lessons we learned."

Just as she stood from the desk to leave, a sudden gust of wind circled the classroom. Papers blew off the walls and a vortex formed in the center of the room. A bright flash illuminated the dark classroom like a bolt of lightning and Mrs. Peters dived under the desk for safety.

Peeking out from underneath the desk, Mrs. Peters could see two pairs of feet appear out of thin air. One wore tennis shoes and the other a pair of sparkling slippers.

"Well, this looks a lot different from when we were sixth-graders," said the familiar voice of a young man. "*Aw man*, how come they get computers and we didn't? I would have stayed awake more if we had those."

"Sign of the times," said another familiar voice, that of a young woman. "I'm sure it won't be long before they stop building schools altogether.

Every kid will be plugged into a device and taught at home. Can you imagine anything worse?"

"Let's focus on one crisis at a time," the young man said. "You look around the computer desks and I'll look through the file cabinet. My stories have got to be in here somewhere."

The feet split up into different corners of the room. Mrs. Peters knew she had heard those voices many times before, but she couldn't picture the faces they belonged to.

"If they weren't in her old office, what makes you think they'll be in here?" the young woman asked.

"It's the only place we haven't looked," he said. "Teachers are sentimental—maybe she put them in a time capsule or something? I just want to look everywhere before we break into her house."

Mrs. Peters couldn't take the suspense any longer. She slowly got to her feet and peered over the desk. As soon as she identified the newcomers she let out a loud gasp, causing them both to jump.

"Mr. Bailey! Miss Bailey!" she said. The twins had grown so much since the last time Mrs. Peters had seen them, especially Alex. Mrs. Peters couldn't help gawking at the long, beautiful gown she wore. It was the color of the sky and sparkled as she moved, like something out of a fairy tale.

Alex and Conner Bailey were just as stunned to see their former teacher as she was to see them.

"Um… hi, Mrs. Peters!" Alex said with a nervous laugh. "Long time no see!"

"Mrs. Peters?" Conner asked. "What are you doing here so late?"

Mrs. Peters crossed her arms and glared at them over her glasses.

"I was about to ask you the same question," she said. "How did you get inside without a key? Where did all that light and wind come from? Are you in the middle of some sort of prank?"

The twins stared at each other for a moment in silence, but neither knew what to tell her. Without any other ideas, Conner began prancing around the room waving his arms through the air like seaweed.

"Mrs. Peters, this is a dreeeeam!" he sang. "You ate some bad sushi and now you're having a nightmare about your former students! Leave the classroom before we manifest into large school supplies!"

Mrs. Peters scowled at his terrible attempt to fool her, and he quickly

dropped his arms to his sides.

"I have a perfectly good grasp over my consciousness, Mr. Bailey," she said. "Now, will one of you explain how you *appeared* in this classroom or do I need to call the police?"

Explaining the situation to someone in the Otherworld should have been an easy task by now, but as the twins stood across from their former teacher in their former classroom, they felt like they were twelve years old again. Mrs. Peters was impossible to lie to, but she would never believe the truth.

"We would, but it's a really long story," Alex said.

"I have a master's degree in English—I *love* long stories," Mrs. Peters said.

The retiree's stern expression suddenly faded from her face. She looked back and forth between the twins, almost in disbelief. It was as if she had figured out the truth all on her own and was having difficulty accepting it.

"Wait a second," Mrs. Peters said. "Does this have anything to do with *the fairy-tale world*?"

The twins' jaws dropped in perfect unison. This was the last thing they expected to come out of her mouth. It was like they were in a film that had suddenly skipped a scene.

"Um… *correct*," Conner said. "Well, *that* was easy."

Alex gave Conner a dirty look—certain there was some information he had forgotten to share with her.

"Conner, you told Mrs. Peters about the fairy-tale world?" Alex asked.

"Of course not!" Conner said. "It was probably Mom! She had to explain our transfers somehow!"

When the twins looked back at Mrs. Peters, she was making a face they had never seen her make before. Her eyes were large and glistening and she covered a huge smile with both hands. The retiree looked like an excited little girl.

"Oh my word," Mrs. Peters said. "After all these years, I finally know it was real.… I can't tell you how much time I've spent wondering if it was just a dream or a hallucination, but you've appeared just like *she* did… and in a dress just like *hers*.…"

The twins couldn't have been more confused.

"*What* was real?" Conner asked.

"*Who* are you talking about?" Alex pressed.

“When I was a very little girl, I was sick in the hospital with pneumonia,” she said. “Late one night, while the nurses were busy with the other patients, a kind woman wearing a dress just like yours appeared in my room. She brushed my hair and read me stories through the night to make me feel better. I figured she must have been some sort of angel. When she left, I begged her to tell me who she was. The woman told me she was a Fairy Godmother and lived in the fairy-tale world.”

The twins couldn’t believe their ears. They had known Mrs. Peters for years but never knew she had any knowledge of the fairy-tale world.

“Whoa, *small worlds*,” Conner said.

“That woman was our grandmother,” Alex said. “She and other fairies used to travel to this world and read fairy tales to children in need. Grandma said the stories always gave children hope.”

Mrs. Peters had a seat on the desk and held a hand over her heart.

“Well, she was right,” she said. “Once I was healthy, I devoured fairy tales for the rest of my childhood. I even became a teacher so I could share the same stories with others.”

“No way!” Conner said. “That’s why you made us do those reports on fairy tales when we were your students! This is *meta*!”

“Conner, I hate when you use that word,” Alex said.

“I agree with Mr. Bailey—*this is meta*!” Mrs. Peters laughed. “Words can’t describe how grateful I am to finally know the truth. All this time, you weren’t living in another state; you were living with your grandmother in the fairy-tale dimension! That explains your abrupt transfers, why your mother was so vague about the details—and I’m assuming it has something to do with Mr. Bailey’s abandonment of the school’s European trip.”

“Guilty,” Conner said sheepishly. “I’m not a delinquent after all!”

“And your grandmother, is she still around?” Mrs. Peters asked.

She seemed so happy, the twins didn’t want to break the news to her.

“Actually, Grandma passed away a little more than a year ago,” Alex said.

“Yeah, just after she *slayed a dragon*!” Conner bragged. “But that’s another long story that will only lead to longer stories—trust me, our future biographer is going to have his hands full—and right now we don’t have time to explain! We’re actually here for something really important.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Peters said.

“Remember when you saved my short stories in a portfolio—for when I started applying to colleges? Do you know where those are?” he asked.

“You don’t have your own copies?” Mrs. Peters asked.

“No, they were handwritten,” Conner said. “It was painful enough writing the originals—my hand couldn’t take making copies.”

“Mr. Bailey, if you’re going to be a writer, you need to learn to secure your work—”

“Yeah, I’m learning that the hard way,” Conner said. “Look, something terrible has happened in the fairy-tale world, and we need my short stories to save it.”

“I’m sure you have a million questions, but like Conner said, we’re really crunched for time,” Alex added. “If you know where they are, *please* point us in the right direction. A lot of people are depending on us.”

From the tone of their voices and the urgency in their eyes, Mrs. Peters could tell they were very serious, so she didn’t question them further.

“You’re in luck,” she said. “I have them with me.”

Mrs. Peters retrieved her purse from under the desk and pulled a large binder out of it. She flipped through the binder, and the twins saw it was filled with hundreds of student essays, math tests, book reports, history exams, and artwork.

“Today was my last day before retirement,” Mrs. Peters said. “I cleaned out my desk and I found *this*. It’s a collection I’ve kept over the years of the student work that made me the most proud to be an educator. Whenever I had a particularly rough day, I would take a look through this and be inspired all over again.”

When she reached the end of the binder, Mrs. Peters unclipped it and handed Conner a stack of papers with messy handwriting.

“Here are your short stories, Mr. Bailey,” she said.

The twins sighed with relief. After a long search, they had finally found them! Conner tried taking them out of Mrs. Peters’s hand, but she tightened her grip.

“I’ll only give you these if you make me a promise,” she said.

“He’ll do whatever you want!” Alex said desperately.

Conner nodded. “Yeah, what she said!”

Mrs. Peters looked straight into his eyes. “When this troubling chapter of your lives comes to an end, promise me you’ll go back to school and

continue writing," she said.

Conner was expecting something much worse than that. "Okay, I promise," he said.

"Good," she said. "The world needs writers like you to inspire them, Mr. Bailey. Don't take your talent for granted, and don't let it go to waste."

Mrs. Peters released her grip on the papers, and Conner's short stories were finally in his possession. Alex was thankful it had been an easy exchange—she had been prepared to hex Mrs. Peters with a paralyzing spell if she needed to.

"I'm happy I made your binder," Conner said.

"I never thought I'd say this, Mr. Bailey, but you are the closest thing to a favorite student I'll ever have," she confessed.

"Me?" Conner said. "But… but… *why*?"

"Yeah, *why*?" Alex said before she could stop herself.

"With all due respect, Miss Bailey, when I'm old and my memory fades I won't remember the students who got the best grades or had the best attendance," Mrs. Peters said. "I'll remember the ones who progressed the most, and your brother has come a long way from taking naps in my class."

"I don't think I progressed any more than anyone else did," Conner said with a shrug.

"That's because no one has the privilege of looking at themselves through someone else's eyes," Mrs. Peters said. "I watched you struggle after your father died—but you didn't let yourself struggle for long. Rather than wallowing in grief, you developed a strong sense of humor. Soon I was constantly condemning your clown antics in class. The following year, when I became principal, I had a feeling there was a remarkable imagination behind that wit. I had your teacher send me samples of your creative writing and my suspicion was right. You chose to *grow* from tragedy—and it takes a very strong person to do that."

Alex smiled proudly at her brother. Conner's whole face turned bright red—he was as good at taking compliments as Mrs. Peters was.

"Aw shucks," he said. "I guess I'm more sophisticated than I thought."

"You'd be surprised," Mrs. Peters said. "I learned a lot about you from your writing, possibly more than you intended to share. Perhaps as you look through your stories again, you'll learn a thing or two about yourself."

This made Conner a little nervous—how much of himself had he

exposed? When he wrote, Conner only worried about telling a good story; he never thought about the fingerprints he left between the lines. He suddenly felt like he was in the shower and had forgotten to lock the bathroom door.

"Thank you, Mrs. Peters," Conner said. "For what it's worth, you've always been my favorite, too. I never would have liked writing if it weren't for you."

Mrs. Peters was so happy she had stumbled upon the Bailey twins tonight. Knowing she helped shape the twins into the wonderful and responsible young adults they'd become was the greatest retirement gift she could have received. She put the binder back into her purse and then glanced up at the clock. It was disheartening to see that the new teacher had obnoxiously decorated the clock to look like the sun.

"I can't believe it's past midnight," Mrs. Peters said. "I'm absolutely exhausted. If you'll both excuse me, I think I'll head—"

With another gust of wind and a flash of light, the Bailey twins disappeared into thin air. It made Mrs. Peters laugh because their quick exit confirmed something she believed with her whole heart.

"Students," she said. "They come and go so quickly."

Chapter One

THE MASKED EMPIRE

The air was filled with so much smoke, you could barely see the sky. Every time it was cleared by a strong wind, it was quickly replenished from another pillaged town or forest fire. During the day, the sun looked like a weak lantern shining through a brown sheet. At night, seeing a star had become as rare as spotting a shooting star.

The fairy-tale world had faced many troubling times in recent years, but never anything like this. It was the first time in history that *happily ever after* seemed impossible to regain.

Over the course of one night, the Wicked Witch of the West's Winkie army attacked the Charming Kingdom and the Troblin Territory. Her flying monkeys were sent to terrorize the Elf Empire and the Corner Kingdom. The Queen of Hearts marched her card soldiers through the Center Kingdom and then wreaked havoc on the Eastern Kingdom. Captain Hook's band of pirates poisoned the waters of Mermaid Bay, sending the mermaids fleeing deeper into the ocean. Captain Hook's flying ship, the *Jolly Roger*, attacked the Fairy Kingdom, leaving the palace in pieces. Then the captain took the Northern Kingdom by storm.

The soldiers and villagers of every kingdom, who had once banded together to fight off the Grande Armée, were no match for these invaders. Their homes and towns were pillaged and burned to the ground. Their farms and stables were raided, and their livestock and horses were stolen.

All the fairies were presumed dead or in hiding. The kings and queens had lost their thrones, and their homes lay in ruins. The forests were slowly burned one at a time, giving the animals and refugees fewer and fewer places to hide.

The kingdoms and territories of yesterday ceased to exist. All the land in

the fairy-tale world had been combined into one large empire ruled by the infamous Masked Man and his newly assembled Literary Army.

The elf, troll, goblin, and human civilians from all over the fairy-tale world were rounded up and marched into the Northern Kingdom. They were pushed into Swan Lake, just beside the severely damaged Northern Palace. The lake had been dried out by the Literary Army, making it a deep, muddy crater, perfect to hold the civilians prisoner. By the time the lake was filled, the sun had started its descent in the western sky. The Literary soldiers pointed their captives' attention to a large balcony of the palace.

Doors opened and the Masked Man appeared. His entire head was covered in a mask made of rubies and jewels with only two slits for his eyes. His raggedy clothes had been upgraded to a well-tailored suit. He wore a long black cape with a collar that towered sinisterly over his head.

The Masked Man finally looked like the menacing ruler he had always wanted to become.

His entrance was met with a thunderous rumble of booing and hissing, which only escalated when the Queen of Hearts, the Wicked Witch of the West, and Captain Hook joined him on the balcony. The Masked Man held his hands out in front of him, embracing the noise as if it were applause.

"Now, now, now," he said. "Is that how you address your new *emperor*?"

The title was not received well by his imprisoned audience. Many of the civilians had stashed food in their clothing before being forced from their homes, and rather than saving it, they threw it angrily at the Masked Man. The self-appointed emperor was pelted with tomatoes, plums, and heads of lettuce.

The civilians roared with laughter. Even the Wicked Witch of the West cackled at the embarrassing scene. But the Masked Man wouldn't let his first moments as emperor become a mockery.

"SILENCE OR I'LL KILL YOU ALL!" the Masked Man yelled.

The food throwing stopped, and a tense hush fell over the dried-up lake. He had already destroyed their villages and homes; there was no telling how far he'd go to gain respect. A winged monkey brought the Masked Man a rag, and he wiped the food off his clothing.

"From this day forward you will no longer be the *people* of your pathetic kingdoms, but the *property* of this empire," he announced. "Disrespect me

again, and I will not show you the same mercy as your weak kings and fragile queens. Anyone who dares to cross me will not only lose their own lives, but will first watch as I take their families' lives as well!"

Children throughout the lake began to cry, and their parents held them tightly. It seemed the darkest days were still ahead.

"I've brought you all here to witness the birth of a new era," the Masked Man preached. "But before we achieve a new future, the ways of the past must be destroyed—and the *leaders* of the past are no exception!"

The Masked Man gestured to a large wooden platform below the balcony, on the lawn between the palace and the dried lake. A very tall man in a long black cloak climbed to the top of the platform and placed a large wooden block in the center.

A dozen flying monkeys pulled a wagon out from behind the palace. It carried all the former kings and queens of the fairy-tale world: Cinderella, King Chance, Sleeping Beauty, King Chase, Snow White, King Chandler, Trollbella, Empress Elvina, Rapunzel, Sir William, and even the young princesses Hope and Ash. All the royals had their hands tied together and were blindfolded and gagged with strips of white cloth.

The tall man on the platform withdrew a large silver axe from inside his cloak. The civilians began screaming and shouting in horror once they realized the purpose of it—*the Masked Man was going to have the royal families executed*!

Although they couldn't see, the kings and queens knew what was happening by the sound of the terrified crowd. They fought against their restraints, but they didn't budge. The civilians desperately tried to climb out of the dried lake to save their rulers, but they were kicked back into the mud. The card soldiers stood around the lake's perimeter and locked arms, forming a wall to block them.

The Masked Man laughed wildly at all the terror he was causing. Winkie soldiers pulled the royals out of the wagon and pushed them up the steps to the platform, then stood guard around it. The cloaked executioner sharpened his axe as he awaited his cue to begin.

"Start with the men, then the women, then the *children*," the Masked Man ordered. "*Your Majesty*, if you would please do the honors…"

The Queen of Hearts stepped to the edge of the balcony. With enlarged eyes and a devious grin, she looked down at the distressed royals like they

were a delicious snack.

"OOOOFFFF WITH THEIR HEEEEEAAAAADS!" she roared.

The lake erupted in protest. The women cried desperate pleas for the execution to stop; the men yelled profanities at the Masked Man for being so cruel. The frightened royal families huddled together in a corner of the platform and trembled.

The executioner selected King Chance to be his first kill. He grabbed him by the arm and dragged him to the block. Cinderella and Hope screamed through their gags when they realized he was no longer standing beside them.

The executioner forced Chance into a kneeling position and placed his head on the wooden block. He held the axe above the king's neck and practiced swinging. With each swing, the civilians gasped, fearing it was the fatal blow. Finally, the executioner raised his axe higher into the air than he had raised it before. The pleas and screams from the helpless bystanders multiplied; the royals knew it was only a matter of seconds before the king lost his head.

The executioner brought the axe down—but as he did, he spun his body so it sliced the platform floor instead of the king's neck. Suddenly, the floor caved in, causing the executioner and all the royals to fall through the platform and disappear from sight. It was so unexpected, the panicked crowd went silent—this couldn't have been part of the plan.

"WHAT JUST HAPPENED?" the Masked Man screamed from the balcony. "GET THEM OUT OF THERE!"

Just as the Winkie soldiers went to inspect the platform, *three large horses burst out from inside it*! Porridge, Buckle, and Oats had been under the platform the entire time. They were pulling a carriage with the executioner and all the royals safely aboard. *The platform had been a large trapdoor!*

"NOOOO!" the Masked Man screamed, and leaned over the balcony as far as he could to get a better look.

To his horror, he saw Goldilocks on Porridge and Jack on Buckle! The couple steered the horses and the carriage into the forest beyond the palace, knocking over dozens of Winkie soldiers as they went. *The execution had turned into a rescue mission right before the Masked Man's eyes!*

Goldilocks glanced back at the rescued royals. "Is everyone all right?"

The royals moaned through their gags. Still blindfolded, they had no clue what was going on. The executioner threw off his cloak—*it had been the Tin Woodman all along*!

"Don't fret, Your Majesties!" he said. "This is a rescue!"

The Tin Woodman sliced off the royals' restraints with his axe.

"We're not out of it yet!" Jack said. "Everyone stay low! This is going to be a bumpy ride!"

Meanwhile, the elf, troll, goblin, and human civilians embraced one another and cheered as their leaders got away. The Masked Man was so furious, he was practically breathing fire. The visible skin around his eyes turned so red, it matched the rubies in his mask.

"AFTER THEM! ALL OF YOU!" he ordered the Literary Army. "DON'T LET THEM ESCAPE!"

The rescue party was chased through the forest by droves of Winkies and card soldiers on horseback. The fleet of flying monkeys followed them from the smoky sky. As the royals removed their blindfolds and looked around, an escape didn't seem likely—there was no way their carriage stood a chance against the approaching Literary soldiers. Luckily, Jack and Goldilocks had friends with a few tricks up their sleeves.

The Winkies and card soldiers were gaining speed and moving closer to the carriage. Goldilocks nodded to Jack and he whistled. Suddenly, Sir Grant and Sir Lampton appeared with dozens of their men on horseback. They formed a protective circle around the carriage of royals and knocked the approaching Literary soldiers to the ground.

"Sir Lampton, is that you?" Cinderella said.

"Hello, Your Majesty," he said. "I wish the circumstances were different, but I'm very pleased to see you're alive!"

Sir Grant and Sir Lampton's men weren't alone—they shared their horses with the Lost Boys from Neverland. When they were close enough, Tootles, Nibs, Curly, and the Lost twins jumped off their horses and landed in the carriage with the royals. The Lost Boys pulled slingshots out of their pockets and launched rocks at the Winkies and card soldiers, hitting them in the face and knocking them off their horses.

"This is fun!" Tootles said.

"Let's make it a game!" Curly said.

"Ten points for the big square ones, and five for the gold guys," Nibs

decided.

"Deal!" the Lost twins said.

The Lost Boys giggled so hard watching the Winkies and cards fall off their horses that tears streamed down their rosy faces. They hadn't had this much fun since they left Neverland.

Thanks to the Lost Boys and Sir Grant and Sir Lampton's men, the number of Literary soldiers trailing the carriage had significantly lowered. But there were still plenty of Winkies and cards left to be concerned about. Luckily, the rescue party was close to the next phase of their plan.

As they raced farther into the forest, Goldilocks spotted an arrow sticking into the side of a tree—*it was a sign*!

"Jack, I see the arrow!" she said. "We're almost to the Merry Men!"

Porridge, Buckle, and Oats were getting tired and starting to slow down, so Jack was relieved to hear it. He whistled toward the treetops as loudly as he could.

"WAS THAT THE WHISTLE WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR, OR DO MY EARS DECEIVE ME?" shouted a boisterous voice from the trees.

Jack rolled his eyes and whistled again.

"THERE IT IS AGAIN! OUR TIME HAS COME, MERRY MEN! ATTACK!"

Robin Hood and his Merry Men swung down from the treetops on ropes like monkeys on vines. Little John, Alan-a-Dale, and Will Scarlet slammed into the Winkies and cards. They knocked them to the ground and stole their horses. Robin Hood flipped through the air, landing in the carriage with the royals. He took off his hat and bowed to the queens.

"HAVE NO FEAR, LADIES, FOR THE TRUE HERO HAS ARRIVED!" he said. He winked at them flirtatiously and kissed Rapunzel's hand, which Sir William didn't appreciate.

"Gosh, I really hate that guy," Jack whispered to Goldilocks.

Robin Hood reached for the bow and quiver of arrows fastened to the back of his vest and joined the Lost Boys in shooting Winkies and cards off their horses. After hitting a few, the Prince of Thieves grew cocky and started showing off for the queens, striking ridiculous poses as he fired.

"DON'T BE INTIMIDATED, LOST BOYS," he said, and rubbed Tootles's head. "BATTLE IS MEANT FOR MEN."

Tootles snapped his slingshot against Robin Hood's buttocks, causing

him to squeal like an injured swine.

"Tootles, save it for the enemy!" Goldilocks reprimanded.

"Sorry, it slipped!" Tootles said.

By now, the Winkies and card soldiers had all been knocked to the ground or had retreated to the Northern Palace. However, the chase wasn't over yet. Piercing screeches echoed through the forest as the flying monkeys descended upon the rescue party.

Jack whistled again. *"Peter, it's your turn!"* he yelled.

Like a rocket, Peter Pan flew out from underneath the carriage where he had been hiding. It happened so fast, he startled the royal families. The Boy Who Never Grew Up handed two bags of firecrackers to Little John and Alan-a-Dale, and matches to Will Scarlet. The Merry Men tossed the firecrackers to Will Scarlet, and once he lit them, Peter quickly scooped them up. The boy flew above the treetops and threw the firecrackers at the approaching flying monkeys.

Each explosion shocked and discombobulated the flying monkeys, and they fluttered to the ground. Peter and the Merry Men continued their firecracker relay until all the flying monkeys had dropped from the sky.

"Take THAT, you overgrown bats!" Peter chuckled.

Trollbella watched Peter Pan in astonishment. Her heart was beating so fast, if it had wings, she could have joined him in flight.

"It's like I was beheaded and went to heaven!" she said. "He's just like Butterboy—but he *floats* and *sparkles*! *I didn't know a boy so wonderful could exist!* Stop it, Trollbella! Pull yourself together! You promised yourself you wouldn't love again until the world was in better condition!"

Still, the Troblin Queen tried to catch the trails of fairy dust Peter left as he flew beside the carriage.

Finally free from the Masked Man's Literary Army, the royals and their rescuers could all breathe a little easier. Goldilocks and Jack took the reins of their horses and steered them into a sharp left, leading the party straight into the Dwarf Forests.

"Where are we going?" Snow White asked.

"Someplace the Masked Man and his army will never find us," Goldilocks said.

"Now, everyone keep as quiet as possible," Jack instructed. "The less noise we make, the better."

The royals obeyed his instructions. The rescue party spent the rest of the day traveling deeper and deeper into the Dwarf Forests. The kings and queens glanced around nervously at the thick forest, as most of them had never been to these parts before. They kept waiting for something frightening to appear, but the forest that infamously housed the most dangerous creatures and criminals in the fairy-tale world seemed rather empty.

They reached a hilly part of the woods just before nightfall. Goldilocks stopped the procession in front of a large boulder sticking into the hillside. She covered her mouth and made a peculiar shape with her hands.

"Coo-KOO, coo-KOO!" she called.

The birdcall echoed through the forest. The party waited anxiously in silence. A moment later, a faint birdcall came from somewhere beyond the boulder.

"Coo-coo-KA, coo-coo-KA."

The boulder was slowly rolled away by two monstrous black bears, revealing a hidden tunnel in the hillside. The sight of the bears frightened the royals and they held one another closely.

"Don't be scared, they're with us," Goldilocks whispered. *"If anyone has reservations about bears, it's me."*

The carriage moved into the tunnel, and the men on horseback followed. Once the entire rescue party was inside, the bears rolled the boulder back so the entrance was hidden again. The rescue party traveled down the tunnel for several hundred feet and then entered a cavernous mine.

The ground was covered in cart tracks that stretched into more tunnels going deeper into the hillside. Thousands of fireflies covered the stalactites above, illuminating the dark cave like earthy chandeliers. Dozens of sheets and quilts were draped over stalagmites to make several tents.

The royal families were very surprised to see they were among hundreds of other refugees. Families of humans, elves, trolls, and goblins were dispersed throughout the mine. There were also several groups of animals: foxes, wolves, badgers, bears, and birds of every kind. Even *the animals* were taking shelter during this terrible time—which explained why the forest was so empty.

There were a few familiar faces among the hideaways as well. Hagetta and Friar Tuck were cooking a meal together in a large cauldron. The

Traveling Tradesman, the old geezer who sold Jack the magic beans that grew the infamous beanstalk, sat against a stalagmite as he counted a collection of chicken feet he kept in a small sack.

Queen Red Riding Hood was in the back of the mine, quietly sitting alone. Her granny and the Little Old Woman from the Shoe Inn sat nearest to her, knitting quilts to make more tents. Slightly, the Lost Boy who had turned into a baby thanks to a youth potion, was taking a nap in a bassinet beside the older women. Blubo, a young flying monkey, was curled up in the bassinet beside him. Thanks to Granny's bad eyesight, she thought he was an extremely furry infant.

Being the pets of high-maintenance women, Clawdius and Lester had become fast friends when they were brought to the mine. The animals also napped together, taking turns using the other as a pillow.

Rook Robins and his father sat in a group with others from their village. Since he had nearly gotten the royals killed a year earlier, seeing them filled Rook with unbearable guilt. He excused himself from his group and took a walk through the tunnels to be alone.

The rescue party's entrance caused quite a commotion. Everyone was so happy to see the royal families were alive that the mine vibrated with emotional cheers. The refugees surrounded the carriage and welcomed their leaders to the only sanctuary left in the fairy-tale world.

"Thank the heavens you're all right!" Hagetta said.

"All our prayers have been answered!" Friar Tuck said.

Jack climbed down from Buckle and then carefully helped Goldilocks off Porridge, an act that became increasingly difficult as Goldilocks's pregnant belly grew every day. It was only a matter of time before they welcomed their child into the world; they only wished a better world awaited it.

Robin Hood and the Merry Men eagerly helped the queens down from the carriage, kissing their hands as they did so, which greatly annoyed their husbands.

"Where are we?" Sleeping Beauty asked.

"We're in an abandoned dwarf mine in the West Hills of the Dwarf Forests," Goldilocks said. "It's not the extravagance you're used to, but we'll be safe here. Very few people know it exists and it's miles from the parts of the woods being burned down."

“We were taking shelter in a small cave in the Northern Mountains, but as you can see, our numbers have grown,” Jack said.

“Where are all these people and creatures from?” King Chase asked.

“All over the kingdoms,” Goldilocks said. “They’re the few who managed to escape the Masked Man’s army. Just like you, they’ve lost everything they had.”

The royals were very sympathetic to the people around them, but clearly had hesitations about sharing the mine with the creatures from the forest.

“I assure you, everyone and everything in this mine is safe,” Sir Lampton said. “We’re all united by the same enemy and must stay so if we want to reclaim our world.”

The royal families looked among themselves and nodded.

“You won’t find any objection from us,” Empress Elvina said on the royals’ behalf. “We need to put aside our differences from the past, otherwise there’ll be no hope for the future.”

Since the elves had a long history of being ostracized by the other kingdoms, the empress’s words spoke volumes. They had already lost so much; *unity* was something they couldn’t afford to lose next.

“Where are all the fairies?” Rapunzel asked.

“In hiding, hopefully,” Goldilocks said.

“Is it true the Fairy Council was turned to stone?” Trollbella asked.

“We don’t know,” Jack said with a long sigh. “Shortly after the kingdoms were attacked, Alex and Conner went to the Fairy Kingdom to find the council and get help, but they never came back.”

Everyone in the mine looked to the ground with worried eyes and a heavy heart. This was the most distressing news of all. Without the Fairy Council or the Bailey twins, how would they ever defeat the Masked Man and his Literary Army? The future looked even bleaker than it had before.

“Alex was right,” Cinderella said. “The Fairy Council should have listened to her. Had they gone after the Masked Man like she requested, none of this would have happened.”

“What about Charlie or that monster who took him?” King Chandler asked. “Has anyone tracked down their whereabouts?”

All the refugees turned to Red, but the queen remained silent. She didn’t have the strength to relive it.

“Red and the Lost Boys found him at Morina’s cottage,” Goldilocks

said. “The witch has imprisoned him inside a magic mirror. They also found the missing children from the Corner and Charming Kingdoms—they’re under some sort of spell that’s draining their youth.”

With everything else that had happened, the royals had almost forgotten about the missing children.

“Can’t we plan a rescue for them, too?” Rapunzel asked.

“The children have been cursed with very dark magic,” Hagetta explained. “Moving them from their beds may take their life force away completely.”

“But what about Charlie?” King Chandler asked. “How do we get him out of the mirror?”

“We *can’t*,” Red said weakly. “Once you’re imprisoned in a magic mirror, it’s nearly impossible to be freed. It takes powerful magic to put someone inside a mirror, but even more powerful magic to take someone out.”

“She’s right,” said Snow White. “My stepmother spent her whole life trying to free the man from her mirror. She was as determined and capable as anyone, and even she needed *the Wishing Spell* to do it.”

The Charming brothers didn’t want to believe it, but there was no escaping the truth. There wasn’t a silver lining in sight—for *any* of their worries.

“They’re no longer missing if we know their location,” Cinderella said. “We must find comfort where we can, otherwise we’ll worry ourselves to death. God willing, the children and Charlie will be among many things we salvage in the months ahead.”

“Yes, but how do we begin salvaging anything?” Sir William asked. “Have we ever faced a threat with such disadvantages?”

It seemed every question was only followed with more terrible news, so everyone in the mine went silent. No one wanted to accept defeat, but the little hope surviving in their hearts was dying fast. If something didn’t happen soon, the fairy-tale world as they knew it would be gone forever.

The tense silence was broken by the Traveling Tradesman, who had been biting his tongue up to this moment.

“Ah-hum.” He coughed.

All the refugees in the mine rolled their eyes at the old geezer. Clearly, he was very unpopular among the survivors. When no one gave him the

floor, the old man tried to get their attention again.

"Ah-HUM!" He coughed even louder.

Hagetta was the only one with enough patience to acknowledge him. "Yes, what is it, old man?" she asked.

"May I offer a suggestion?" the Traveling Tradesman asked.

His question was immediately followed by a chorus of loud sighs. Every time the Tradesman opened his mouth he only filled their heads with nonsense. But, to be fair to the old man, Jack raised his hands and silenced the exasperated crowd.

"Unless someone else has a suggestion to share, there's no point in discrediting his," he said.

Red grunted dramatically. "Everyone cover your ears," she said. "I've heard *crazy* is contagious in small quarters."

Despite the rudeness he received from his peers, the Traveling Tradesman went to the center of the mine so everyone could see him, and he offered them his suggestion.

"Perhaps we're all looking at the situation from the wrong perspective," he said. "In times as troubling as these, let's not torture ourselves further with questions we don't have the answers to—*let's ask the rocks*!"

He proposed the idea as if everyone else was supposed to know what he was talking about.

"ASK THE *ROCKS*?" Robin Hood said. "MERRY MEN, I BELIEVE THE STRANGE OLD MAN IS OFF HIS *ROCK*-ER!"

Robin Hood laughed wildly at his own joke, but no one joined him. The Tradesman was frustrated that he had to explain himself.

"Not just *any rocks*!" he said. "In my possession, I happen to have *precious premonition stones* that are directly connected to *the will of the fates*!"

The wacky old man reached for his stones, but they were missing from his belt. He spun around in circles, looking all over the ground for where he might have dropped them.

"Where on earth are my precious stones?" he demanded. "Has anyone seen them? They were in a skunk-skin sack."

All five of the Lost Boys turned bright red.

"Oops," Tootles said. "We might have used those during the rescue."

"You did WHAT?" the Tradesman yelled. *"Those rocks are thousands of*

years old! They're meant for predicting the future, not slingshots!"

"Sorry, we didn't mean to!" Tootles said.

"They didn't look like special rocks to us," Curly said.

"You really shouldn't leave your stones lying around," Nibs said.

"Yeah! There are kids in here!" the Lost twins said.

The Tradesman sat on the ground and wrapped his arms around his head. "Now what am I supposed to use to predict the will of the fates?" he asked.

The Lost Boys checked their pockets.

"Would *marbles* work?" Tootles asked.

The Traveling Tradesman let out a deep, apprehensive sigh. "Very well —hand them over."

Tootles poured a small bag of colorful marbles into the Tradesman's shaky hands. He closed his eyes, rubbed the marbles together, and whispered strange gibberish to them. Finally, he threw them on the ground in front of him and carefully watched them bounce and roll into one another.

"Interesting," he said. "*Very* interesting."

The Tradesman hemmed and hawed as if the marbles were speaking a language only he understood. It was much more of an ordeal than the refugees were expecting. Curiosity got the best of them and they formed a circle around him.

"What are the marbles saying?" Jack asked.

"Don't be ridiculous—*marbles don't speak*! They simply move as the fates command," the Tradesman said. "You see this gray one? Dull, dreary, and stuck in the dirt—*that represents us*! See the blue one and the pink one, moving together in perfect unison away from the gray—*those must represent the twins*! Fear not, the Baileys are alive!"

A few of the refugees cheered—but quickly stopped when they remembered the information was coming from an old geezer talking to marbles.

"But where are they?" Jack asked.

"They're far away from us by now, most likely in the Otherworld—*but wait*!"

All the refugees leaned in a little closer. Crazy or not, this was still the most entertaining thing they had seen in weeks.

“See how the blue and the pink rolled toward the silver, yellow, purple, and red? *Now watch*—the pink and blue are rolling back to the gray with the silver, yellow, purple, and red! *Look, all the marbles have knocked the gray out of the dirt! It’s a MIRACLE!*”

The Tradesman leaped to his feet and threw his hands into the air in celebration. The refugees were on pins and needles waiting for the message to be interpreted. Even if the news was not as great as it appeared, the Tradesman’s enthusiasm was infectious—they hoped this wasn’t the *crazy* that Red was talking about.

“What does it all mean?” Jack asked.

“It means the twins will have to travel to places far, far away, but will return with help and save our world!” the Tradesman said. “But this will happen if, and *only* if…”

“Yes?”

“Worlds collide,” the Tradesman said with large, energetic eyes.

No one had a clue what the old man was talking about, but they were all so desperate for something positive, they took it as a good sign. Red, on the other hand, was not as enthusiastic.

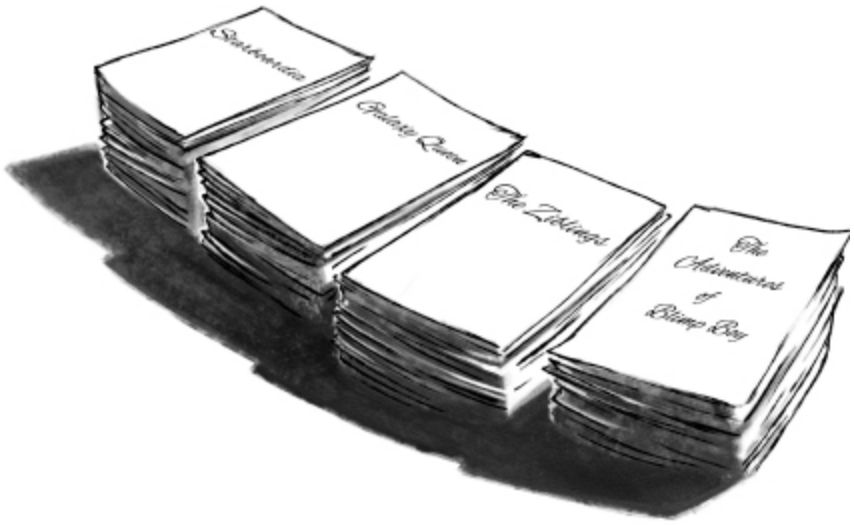
“All I see is an old man who’s lost his marbles,” she said.

The other refugees slowly came to their senses, too. Just because this was the closest thing to good news they had received didn’t make it credible.

“I agree with the old man,” Goldilocks announced. “It doesn’t matter what the marbles say or don’t say—the Bailey twins have never let us down before. Just because we haven’t heard from them yet doesn’t mean we should give up on them. We have to have faith they’ll return with help.”

“But what do we do in the meantime?” Red asked.

“Wait,” Goldilocks said. “It’s all we can do.”


Starboardia
Galaxy Queen
The Zittings
The Adventures of Blimp Boy

Chapter Two

GROUNDED

Alex and Conner left their sixth-grade classroom and found a neighborhood park where they could rest and form the next phase of their plan. It was an hour or so before sunrise, and the night sky was lightening with every passing minute. Everything was so quiet and peaceful, it was difficult to imagine how chaotic life was back in the fairy-tale world and what awful things their friends might be enduring.

The closer it came to sunrise, the more people drove past the park on their early work commutes. Naturally, Alex had seen this many times before, but every car she saw gave her a small thrill. It had been a long time since she'd been back to the Otherworld, and it wasn't until this moment that she realized how much she missed it.

"It's nice to see how little things have changed here," Alex said. "The fairy-tale world changes so much, I've never had a moment to catch my breath."

Conner was only half listening. He flipped through the pages of his short stories and separated them into four stacks on the ground.

"Great, they're all here!" he said. "'Starboardia,' 'Galaxy Queen,' 'The Ziblings,' and 'The Adventures of Blimp Boy'! Those are the stories with characters that can help us! We'll use the potion to travel inside the stories, find the heroes, and then take them back to the fairy-tale world to help us fight our uncle's army."

Alex had only agreed to her brother's plan because their options were so limited. The closer they got to actually going through with it, the more doubtful she became. It was one thing to travel into the books of classic literature, but an entirely different endeavor to go into short stories written by her brother.

“Your stories sound more elaborate than I was expecting,” Alex said. “I thought you wrote about our experiences in the fairy-tale world and just changed all the names.”

“That’s how it started,” Conner said. “But after I got the hang of it, I might have exaggerated things a bit and taken some liberties. All good writers do—I think.”

“Liberties?” Alex asked fearfully. “Conner, what exactly are we getting ourselves into?”

Conner waved it off like it wasn’t a big deal.

“Relax, there’s nothing more dangerous than what we’ve already been through,” he said. “‘Starboardia’ is a pirate adventure, ‘Galaxy Queen’ is about space exploration, ‘The Ziblings’ are a group of superheroes, and ‘The Adventures of Blimp Boy’ follows a young archaeologist. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

The summaries didn’t comfort his sister at all. The twins were lucky they had survived their adventures over the years. If his stories were based on those experiences, Alex wasn’t eager to relive any of them—especially if they had been exaggerated by her brother’s warped imagination.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Alex said. “I don’t mean to sound like a snob, but maybe we should stick to *published* stories.”

“Stop worrying,” Conner said. “There are no evil enchantresses, no dragons, no French soldiers, and no literary armies. All my characters are based on people we know and love. They have the same bravery, intelligence, and compassion as our friends—they’ll *want* to help us. We’ll be in and out before the antagonists even show up.”

“What are we going to do with your characters after we bring them out?” Alex asked. “Where are we going to keep them?”

Conner had been so worried about *finding* his stories, he hadn’t thought about what they’d do after they found them.

“Good point,” he said. “We need a place they can stay while we recruit the characters from the other stories. We also need someone to keep an eye on them so they don’t wander off—someone we trust completely, who won’t totally freak out about what we’re doing.”

The twins thought about the perfect place and the perfect person for the job, but the candidates were few and far between. It had to be someone in the Otherworld who already knew about the fairy-tale world, someone who

had seen magic before and wouldn't be alarmed by it. The person had to be responsible enough to supervise several fictional characters and have enough space to host them. Alex and Conner came to the same conclusion at the exact same time. They looked at each other and knew they were thinking the same thing—there was only one person qualified for the task.

"Mom!" the twins said in unison.

The resolution was immediately followed by an avalanche of guilt.

"I can't remember the last time I talked to Mom," Alex said.

"Neither can I," Conner said. "She's probably worried sick."

"We've been so busy trying to save the fairy-tale world, we never had a chance to call home and check in," Alex said.

"We're good people, but *terrible* children," Conner said.

"Regardless of whether she wants to help us or not, we need to visit her so she knows we're alive," Alex said. "Let's just hope she cooperates."

The twins were in complete agreement. Conner gathered his stories, and they headed out of the park. Alex followed her brother but was confused by the direction he was walking in.

"Where are you going?" she asked him.

"Home," he said.

"But home is *that* way."

"No, home *used* to be that way," Conner said. "Mom and I moved in with Bob after they got married, remember?"

Alex's guilt was doubled by another avalanche—she was so out of the loop, she didn't even know where her own family lived anymore. Whenever she thought about her mom and stepdad in the Otherworld, she always imagined them living in the rental house they had moved into when her and Conner's dad passed away. Perhaps the Otherworld had changed more than she thought.

"I'm the worst daughter in the world," she said. "This isn't going to be a fun visit, is it?"

"Nope," Conner said. "Mom's gonna be pretty upset when she sees us, and I won't blame her."

They reached the edge of the park and Conner came to a stop.

"Aren't you forgetting something else?" he said.

"What?" Alex asked.

Conner looked his sister up and down, like it was obvious. "Alex, you're

dressed like the Tooth Fairy," he said. "You can't go walking around the suburbs like that."

"Oh," she said. "You're right—one second."

With a quick spin, Alex transformed her sparkling dress and shoes into a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers.

"I forgot how comfortable Otherworld clothes are," she said.

"You look like *you* again," Conner said. "Now come on, the quicker we do this, the better."

They walked through the neighborhood streets until they found Sycamore Drive. By now the sun had risen and Alex could see all the spacious homes on the street. She was delighted her mom and Bob lived in such a lovely neighborhood. Alex knew which house was theirs before Conner pointed it out because the flower beds were covered with their mom's favorite roses.

"Hopefully they'll be home," Conner said. "They're usually starting a day shift or ending a night shift around this time."

The twins walked up the curved path and knocked on the door. A few moments later, their stepdad answered. Bob was still in his pajamas and on his first cup of coffee. His eyes were puffy, like he had just woken up. The doctor did a double take when he saw Alex and Conner standing behind the door.

"Good morning, Bob," Alex said cheerfully. "Nice to see you again!"

Bob rubbed his eyes and scratched his head. He wasn't convinced he was awake yet.

"Um… *hi*," he said. "Well, this is a surprise."

"Is Mom home?" Conner said. "We have to talk to her."

"Yeah, she's upstairs getting ready for work. Boy, she'll be very glad to see you," he said. *"Charlotte, you have visitors!"* he called into the house.

The twins heard a window open above the porch. They looked up and saw Charlotte looking down at them from the second story, already dressed for work in her blue scrubs. Her face had many expressions at once—shock that she was looking at her children, relief that they were all right, joy that they had finally come home—but it settled on anger.

"Hi, Mom," the twins said apologetically.

"INSIDE. NOW," Charlotte said, and slammed the window.

Conner gulped. "We're off to a good start."

Before they knew it, Alex and Conner were seated on the living room sofa and their mother was furiously pacing in front of them. She was so upset, she couldn't form the words to scold them. Bob sat in an armchair beside the twins. He peered cautiously over his coffee, afraid for their safety.

"The new house is really nice," Alex said. "I really like how you decorated—"

"Quiet," Charlotte said. "Do either of you have any idea what you've put me through? I've been so worried, I haven't slept in months!"

"We're really sorry, Mom," Conner said. "We didn't mean to worry—"

"Less talking, more listening," she said. "Do you know what it's like to go to the grocery store and be asked 'How are your children doing?' and have absolutely no clue yourself? Do you know what it's like to tell a school district 'My children have transferred schools' with no proof of a transfer? Do you know what it's like to hear nothing from your children for weeks at a time except 'Sorry we didn't call you back, Mom, we had to fight a dragon,' or 'Got to go, Mom, an army is invading the castle'?"

Charlotte glared at her children as she waited for an answer, but the twins stayed silent. They didn't know if they were allowed to speak or if she was just pausing for dramatic effect.

"For your sake, I hope *your* future children show you more respect and courtesy than *mine* have shown me," Charlotte went on. "Because *not knowing* if your children are dead or alive in another dimension is the worst feeling you could ever have. It's worse than fighting enchantresses, it's worse than slaying dragons, and it's worse than battling armies, *I promise you*!"

Tears came to Charlotte's eyes and she looked away from the twins to wipe them with a tissue. The guilt the twins had felt before was nothing compared to the guilt they felt now. It tightened their stomachs and chests so much, they thought their bodies might implode.

"Mom, we weren't neglecting you on purpose," Alex said. "We'd like to explain, if you give us a chance. Something really terrible has happened and we need your help—"

"I don't care what's happened!" Charlotte said. "There will always be another crisis in the fairy-tale world to tend to! Your family should come first! That's what your father and I raised you to believe, or so I thought."

“You did—and we do,” Conner said. “But so many people’s lives are in danger—”

“What about *your lives*?” Charlotte asked. “Since you were thirteen years old, you’ve been so busy saving other people, you’ve never taken care of yourselves. Do either of you even know what *today* is?”

Alex and Conner looked at each other, but neither knew what she was referring to. They quickly went through a mental list of possible holidays or special occasions that it could be, but both were blanking.

“Is it your and Bob’s anniversary?” Conner asked.

Charlotte looked more heartbroken than ever. “No, today’s your fifteenth birthday,” she said.

The twins were shocked. How could they not have known it was their birthday? Suddenly, everything Charlotte said made perfect sense. They were so occupied with saving other people, they were missing out on their own lives.

Charlotte glanced at her watch and then grabbed her purse and car keys off the rack by the front door.

“I have to go to work,” she said. “Both of you are *grounded*.”

Conner glanced at Alex. “Wait, can she still do that?” he asked.

“You bet I can!” Charlotte said. “I want both of you to go upstairs to your bedrooms and stay there until I get home.”

“Do I even have a bedroom here?” Alex asked.

Charlotte was offended she had to ask. “Of course you do,” she said. “When I get back, we’re going to go out for a *nice family dinner* to celebrate your birthday.”

“Mom, that sounds nice, but we’re really pressed for time,” Alex said.

“Alexandra Bailey, it’s the least you can do for me,” Charlotte said. “After we have a *nice family dinner* and discuss *normal family things*, we can talk about what you need help with—but only *after.* Conner, please show your sister to her bedroom.”

Charlotte left for work, leaving her children in very uncomfortable silence. They were feeling so many things—guilt, shame, disappointment, anxiety—they didn’t know which emotion to settle on.

Bob tried to break the tension, but even he didn’t know what to feel.

“So…” Bob said. *“Happy birthday?”*

Chapter Three

THE FALLEN EMPEROR

The civilians were so thankful their kings and queens had escaped execution, they all stood a little taller in the dried-up lake. However, to avoid being the target of the emperor's building frustration, they kept as still and quiet as possible.

Inside the ruins of the Northern Palace, in a large chamber that Queen Snow White and King Chandler once ruled from, the Masked Man paced feverishly in front of his new throne. The large chair had been built from the pieces of all the other thrones of the kingdoms the Literary Army had conquered.

"I don't understand how your idiot soldiers didn't know the platform was rigged!" he yelled. "Why didn't they check it?"

The Wicked Witch of the West, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook stood before the Masked Man. The new emperor had fallen into a daring routine of blaming the literary villains when something didn't go exactly as planned.

"*Our* soldiers?" the Wicked Witch of the West said. "You've been commanding our armies since we arrived! If you wanted them to inspect the platform before the execution, *you* should have ordered it!"

The literary villains had endured about as much as they could stand from the Masked Man. It was thanks to them he was emperor in the first place, but instead of fulfilling his end of their bargains, the Masked Man was bossing them around as if they were his servants. Power had clearly gone to his head, and *that* was far enough.

"I've heard enough about how *we* have failed *you*!" the Queen of Hearts barked. "It's time you coughed up what *you* promised *us*!"

"You promised me Peter Pan!" Captain Hook shouted.

"And you promised me the silver slippers!" the Wicked Witch of the West hollered.

"And you promised me HEADS!" the Queen of Hearts roared.

The Masked Man didn't have an ounce of empathy for the literary villains. Their frustration was nothing compared to the rage boiling inside of him.

"You will get what I promised once the royals have been recaptured and executed," the Masked Man said. "You agreed to make me an emperor, and I won't be a true emperor until all my adversaries have been destroyed!"

Footsteps echoed through the throne room. The Masked Man and the literary villains turned to see Mr. Smee sprinting toward them. The pirate was sweating, wheezing, and shaking—like he had been running from something terrible.

"Excuse me, Your Excellency?" Smee panted.

"This better be important," the Masked Man said.

"It's about the creature in the dungeon, sir," Smee said.

The creature responsible for turning the Fairy Council into stone was kept in the dungeon in the very same cell that once contained the Evil Queen. It was a monster of legendary power, so the Masked Man had ordered all of Captain Hook's pirates to patrol the dungeon and keep an eye on it.

"Yes, what about it?" the Masked Man asked.

Mr. Smee was trembling so much, his knees rattled together. No matter how he put it, he knew the emperor would be furious when he heard the news.

"It escaped!" Smee said. "Somehow it managed to take off its blindfold while it was in its cell! When the pirates went to feed it, they looked it in the eye and were turned into stone!"

Like steam from a teakettle, so much anger built up inside the Masked Man that a thunderous howl erupted from his mouth. He wrapped his hands around Smee's throat and strangled the pirate. The day had turned into an epic disaster, and unfortunately for him, it was about to get much worse.

A horn was blown outside to announce the return of the Literary soldiers who had been sent after the royal families. The Masked Man dropped Smee and bolted outside to the balcony. The Wicked Witch, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook followed him.

From the balcony, the Masked Man could see the Winkies and card soldiers slowly emerging from the forest. They were all battered and bruised; many couldn't even walk without the help of another. They had come back with far fewer horses than they left with. The flying monkeys descended from the skies, but looked just as bad as the Winkies and cards, if not worse. They were so discombobulated that many missed the balcony and smacked into the walls of the palace.

Worst of all, there was no sign of the royal families anywhere. The Masked Man grabbed the closest winged monkey by its vest and shook him violently.

"WHERE ARE THE ROYAL FAMILIES?" he roared.

"They escaped!" the monkey screeched.

"HOW DID THEY GET AWAY? YOU OUTNUMBERED THEM TEN TO ONE!" the Masked Man screamed.

"They had a very strategic plan we weren't prepared for! They had backup waiting in the woods! Men on horses, men in the trees, *they even had a boy who flew*!"

The Masked Man felt like his heart had fallen out of his chest. If it weren't for his mask, they would have seen all the color drain from his face. He prayed he had misheard the winged monkey and that his ears were playing a cruel trick on his mind.

"Did you just say *'they even had a boy who flew'*?" he asked.

The winged monkey nodded. "Yes, sir," it said. "He wore clothes made out of leaves! He flew up from the trees and threw firecrackers at us!"

"PETER PAN!" Captain Hook growled. "You said he'd be trapped inside the book until we retrieved him!"

The Masked Man threw the winged monkey on the floor and clutched his chest. He felt like he was having a heart attack. Every time he thought the situation couldn't get worse, he was proved otherwise.

"No, this isn't possible!" the Masked Man said. "If Peter Pan managed to escape, that would mean my niece and nephew did, too!"

The Masked Man turned to the literary villains, and his fury quickly dissolved into fear. The Queen of Hearts and Captain Hook were more furious than he had ever seen them. With Peter Pan and the royal families out of his reach, the Masked Man wasn't capable of fulfilling his end of their agreements. They had followed him into the fairy-tale world and given

him the use of their soldiers and cavalry for nothing.

"Listen, I can still give you what I promised," he said. "I just need more time!"

Captain Hook and the Queen of Hearts slowly moved toward him, backing him into the railing of the balcony.

"LIAR!" the Queen of Hearts roared. "No *royals*, no *HEADS*!"

"And you can't *give* me Peter Pan if you don't *have* Peter Pan!" Captain Hook said through a clenched jaw.

Afraid he was about to be knocked off the balcony, the Masked Man fell to his knees and groveled at the Wicked Witch's feet.

"I can still give you the silver slippers!" he pleaded. "Not all is lost!"

"I won't be fooled by any more of your lies!" the Wicked Witch of the West said. "Your reign ends today!"

The Wicked Witch of the West tapped the floor with her umbrella, and two of her flying monkeys grabbed the Masked Man by the arms. They flew him as high into the sky as they possibly could and dangled him above the forest. The civilians in the dried-up lake alerted one another to the sight, but no one knew what was happening.

"DON'T DO THIS!" the Masked Man cried. "YOU'RE MAKING A MISTAKE! MY NIECE AND NEPHEW WILL DESTROY YOU WITHOUT ME!"

"Our biggest mistake was trusting you!" the Wicked Witch of the West shrieked. She tapped her umbrella again and the flying monkeys dropped the Masked Man. He plummeted toward the earth, screaming the entire way down, and landed somewhere deep in the forest.

"Look, the emperor has fallen!" The Wicked Witch of the West cackled.

It was obvious to the civilians that the literary villains had just staged a coup. Now that the Masked Man was gone, the civilians wanted to cheer, but the emperor's death didn't mean their troubles were over.

"If we aren't getting what we came for, then what should we do now?" Captain Hook asked. "Return to Neverland, Oz, and Wonderland?"

The literary villains thought it over, but now that they had seen the fairy-tale world with their own eyes, their own worlds weren't that appealing. With the Masked Man gone, they had unlimited power over the strange land, and power is easily addictive when placed in the wrong hands. It seemed the fairy-tale world had much more to offer them than their own

worlds did.

"I rather like this world," Captain Hook said. "There are no Lost Boys, mermaids, or Indians to fight. And if Peter Pan is here, there's no reason to return to Neverland."

"There are no White Queens, Mad Hatters, or Cheshire Cats to pester us," the Queen of Hearts said. "Why return to Wonderland when I have plenty of heads to roll right here?"

"There are no wizards, Munchkins, or Good Witches to stand in our way," the Wicked Witch of the West said. "And I have more power here than the silver slippers could have given me in Oz!"

The literary villains shared a menacing smile.

"Let's stay in this world and rule the empire ourselves," the Wicked Witch said. "Perhaps if we work together, we'll achieve even *more* than what the Masked Man promised us."

The villains turned their gaze to the civilians in the dried-up lake.

From the way the three villains glared down from the balcony, the civilians knew the nightmare was far from over.…

Chapter Four

A NICE FAMILY DINNER

The Storybook Grill was a popular place for dinner during the week. By seven o'clock each night, the diner was usually filled with families and teenagers ordering their weight in Goblin Fries and Midnight Milk Shakes. There were always loud and energetic crowds, and tonight was no exception.

However, the group in the booth at the very back did not match the liveliness of the other patrons, so they stuck out like a sore thumb.

Cindy, Lindy, Mindy, and Wendy—four teenage girls recently reinstated as the Book Huggers—somberly sipped milk shakes and shared a basket of fries. The girls each had a copy of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in front of them, but none of them seemed very interested in it.

"We should probably talk about the book if we're going to be a book club again," Cindy said.

The other girls nodded, but no one was eager to start. The quartet had recently taken a break from books to focus on other passions—well, *passion*—and started the Conspiracy Club. However, that club only made them more restless than they already were, and they had been advised to take up reading again.

"Did anyone have a favorite passage they'd like to share?" Cindy asked. "Or maybe a favorite character?"

All the Book Huggers were quiet, forcing Cindy to take charge.

"Lindy, let's start with you," she said.

Lindy was awkwardly hunched over her milk shake and staring off into space when Cindy called on her. Wherever her mind was, it wasn't on *Sherlock Holmes.*

“Um… I liked the *hound*?” Lindy said.

“*The Hound of the Baskervilles*?” Cindy asked.

Lindy looked uncomfortably from side to side. “Was there more than one?”

“Did you even read the book?” Cindy asked.

Lindy hunched lower than before and shamefully shook her head.

“Did *anyone* read the book this week?” Cindy asked.

The other Book Huggers slumped with embarrassment and shook their heads as well. Cindy let out a long and frustrated sigh.

“We can’t revive our book club if we’re not going to read books,” she said. “But if I’m honest, I didn’t read *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, either.”

“I started it,” Mindy said. “It was just so hard focusing on a fictitious mystery when *the real-life mystery* has never been solved.”

The Book Huggers nodded in agreement. No matter how hard they tried to inspire themselves with new interests, new hobbies, and new clubs, or by resurrecting old clubs, the only thing consistently on their minds for the past year was the disappearance of Alex and Conner Bailey.

“You’d think it’d get easier over time, but it doesn’t,” Lindy said.

“We only started asking questions about Alex because we were bored and had read all the books in the school library,” Mindy said. “But every answer only gave us more questions, and the more questions we had, the more infatuated we became.”

“I’ve read books and watched television shows about people with real-life obsessions, but I never thought I’d become one of them,” Lindy said. “It’s all I think about when I’m awake, and all I dream about when I’m asleep.”

Wendy nodded—it was affecting her sleep, too.

“Bree Campbell knows something we don’t,” Cindy said. “But until one of us gains telepathic powers—or waterboarding is legalized—I don’t think we’ll ever get it out of her.”

“She’s been absent from school for almost two whole weeks!” Mindy said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s the next one to get ‘*transferred to Vermont*,’ as they say.”

Life had become exhausting to no end for the Book Huggers. They felt like mice stuck in a maze with no cheese.

“What are we going to do, girls?” Lindy asked the table. “I don’t want this to affect the rest of our lives! I want to become a psychologist—not *need* a psychologist!”

“I’ll never be a heart surgeon if I can’t focus in medical school!” Mindy said.

“I’ll never win my first presidential debate if I can’t remember real issues!” Cindy said.

Wendy pointed to the ceiling and made an X with her fingers—implying she would never fulfill her dream of becoming an astronaut.

“It’s gone too far, ladies,” Cindy said. “This is just like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and there’s no use fighting Big Brother anymore. We have to pull ourselves together while we still can. For the sake of our sanity and our destinies, we have to forget about the Bailey twins.”

The Book Huggers raised their milk shakes and clinked them together. They were ready to turn over a new leaf. The undertaking wouldn’t be easy, but it was necessary if they ever wanted to live normal lives again.

Unfortunately, the Book Huggers’ noble venture was about to feel like the punch line of a great cosmic joke.

The front door of the Storybook Grill swung open, and the Bailey twins walked in with Charlotte and Bob. Wendy happened to glance up from her milk shake right at that second and was the first to notice Alex and Conner. For the first moments after seeing them, Wendy was certain she was hallucinating. They had *just* been talking about the Bailey twins—it was way too coincidental for them to be in the same diner at exactly the same time.

But the longer they stayed in her sight without disappearing, the more she realized they weren’t a mirage—*the real-life Alex and Conner Bailey were right there*! Wendy was paralyzed with shock. The color drained from her face, and she couldn’t feel her arms or legs.

“I think we should actually read *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*,” Cindy said. “Next week, we’ll come back to this diner and have a real discussion about it, just like we used to.”

“I concur,” Mindy said. “But can we do it a week from tomorrow? I’m getting my braces off a week from today.”

“Congratulations!” Lindy said. “Will you have to wear a retainer?”

Wendy began humming to get the other Book Huggers’ attention, but

she was drowned out by the noise of the diner.

"Just for the first six weeks, then only at night after that," Mindy said.

"I was so relieved when I finally had mine taken off," Cindy said. "It felt like handcuffs had been removed from my mouth."

"My dentist said I don't need braces," Lindy said. "It's probably a good thing—I wouldn't have the patience for them."

Wendy couldn't believe they were talking about something so meaningless when something so extraordinary was right in front of them. She managed to regain feeling in one hand and lightly tapped Cindy on the shoulder with it.

"Wendy, are you okay?" Lindy said.

"You look like you're going to be sick," Mindy said.

"Was there something in your Midnight Milk Shake?" Cindy asked.

Desperate for them to see what she was seeing, Wendy used resources she hadn't used since the first grade—*spoken words*!

"Alex… Conner… over there!" Wendy peeped.

Her voice was high-pitched and squeaky like a baby bird's. The Book Huggers were so shocked to hear her make a noise, it took them a second to realize she had actually used *words out loud* and they had *meaning*. Once the message was interpreted, they jerked their heads in the direction of the door so fast that they pulled muscles in their necks. Once they all saw the Bailey twins with their own eyes, the Book Huggers went as still and pale as Mount Rushmore.

The twins were all eyes as they looked around at the diner's fusion of fairy-tale and 1950s decor. They knew Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters had opened a restaurant after moving to the Otherworld, but this was their first time seeing it.

Rosemary was in the middle of taking an order when she saw the Baileys out of the corner of her eye. The waitress abandoned the customers in mid-sentence to greet her old friends.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!" Rosemary said, and hugged the twins.

"Hi, Rosemary," Conner said. "This place looks great!"

"Are Petunia and your mom around?" Alex asked.

"Mother has the night off and Petunia got another job, working for a veterinarian," Rosemary said. "Good riddance, if you ask me—she was a

lousy waitress! I'll be sure to tell them you stopped by! Are you coming for dinner?"

"Yes," Charlotte said. "Table for four, please."

"Right this way," Rosemary said.

The stepsister grabbed four menus and sat them in a booth directly next to the Book Huggers. The girls quickly grabbed their copies of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and covered their faces with them, but Alex and Conner weren't paying attention. The twins were so amused by all the art and knickknacks throughout the diner, they didn't even notice their former classmates.

"How's Cinderella doing?" Rosemary asked the twins once they were settled in their booth.

"Well, actually—"

Alex was about to tell Rosemary the truth when her mother gave her a stern look. Anything that might get them off the topic of *nice family discussion* wasn't allowed at dinner tonight.

"Just fine," Alex said. "Hope's growing like a weed."

"Wonderful. Please give them my best," Rosemary said. "I hope you enjoy the food. When you're ready to order, just wave me down—oh, we're out of the Beanstalk Salad tonight."

Rosemary went back to the customers while Alex and her family looked over the menu. It referenced so many people and places in the fairy-tale world, it was absolutely aggravating not to talk about the current crisis. The twins hoped their *nice family dinner* would end as soon as possible.

"So kids, what's new?" Charlotte asked. "How are your friends doing?"

She was so calm and casual, Alex and Conner knew she wasn't referring to the truth. They shared a curious look, and it suddenly dawned on them what their mother was doing. Their *nice family dinner* was a chance for Mom to pretend they were a perfectly normal family, living perfectly normal lives. The twins felt like they were in a play they didn't have the script for.

"Good," Conner said. "Um… Goldilocks and Jack are expecting their first baby!"

"That's wonderful," Charlotte said. "Do they know if it's a boy or a girl?"

She knew as well as he did that the fairy-tale world didn't have

ultrasounds, but he continued playing her game.

"Nope," Conner said. "I guess they're waiting to be surprised."

"Your father and I did the same thing when we had you," Charlotte said. "We weren't sure if we were having two boys or two girls, we just knew there would be two of you. Imagine our surprise when we had one of each —we didn't have to return any of the baby clothes."

Conner found this fascinating. "Really?" he said. "What would you have named us if we were two girls or two boys?"

"The firstborn was going to be an Alex no matter what," Charlotte said. "I've loved that name since I was a little girl—it was the name of my favorite doll. But if Conner had been a girl, his name would have been Sarah."

"What a coincidence! Before Margret passed away, we were planning on having a baby, and if it was a girl, we would have named her Sarah, too," Bob said. "Were Alex and Conner an easy delivery?"

Charlotte let out a long laugh as the memory came to her.

"Giving birth was easy compared to the days that followed," she said. "Their grandmother was so excited to have grandchildren, she visited us every day with someone new from the fairy-tale world. The first day she brought Mother Goose, who almost mistakenly switched Conner's bottle with her flask! Thank goodness I was an overly protective first-time mom and saw it happen! The second day we had the whole Fairy Council in the house. They were lovely, but kept magically upgrading our belongings into nicer things. By the time they left, we didn't even recognize our house!"

The twins had never heard this story before and laughed just as hard as Bob did. They could tell their mom enjoyed telling it as much as they enjoyed hearing it.

"Those were good times," Charlotte said with a bittersweet smile. "I miss them."

These were the moments of *nice family discussion* that Charlotte was so desperate for. The Baileys hadn't had them since the twins' father died. There was no talk of death or turmoil like in their usual conversations; they were just a family laughing and sharing stories with one another.

As much as Alex wanted to continue hearing stories about their parents, not addressing the issues at hand was eating her alive. Conner could feel the impatience boiling inside his sister. He knew it was only a matter of time

before she ended their mother's game of pretend.

"Mom, I'm sorry you haven't had more moments to tell us stories like that," Alex said. "You're right, you and Dad raised us to put family first and we haven't for a long time."

"Thank you, Alex," Charlotte said. "That means a lot."

"But," Alex said, "I can't keep pretending everything is okay when we know it's not."

Conner covered his face with his hands. "Oh boy, here we go," he said.

"Alex, I asked you guys not to bring this up—"

"I'm sorry, but I have to," Alex said. "Right now, a lot of people need our help. I know Conner and I have given up a lot, and you've given up a lot by association, but we don't care what we'll have to sacrifice if it saves our friends and all the families like ours. We're *doing the right thing* because *that's* also the kind of son and daughter you and Dad raised. So please—*let us*."

Charlotte looked at her children differently than she had all day. She wasn't glaring at them with frustration or anger, but with pride. She reached across the table and held their hands with her own.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I've been a little selfish. All I want is for you to have the same experiences every teenager gets to have before this time in your lives is gone, but I forget there's nothing *normal* about you. It doesn't matter what I want—you should be living the lives you were meant for. Forgive me, it was just so difficult losing your father; I hate feeling like I've lost you, too."

"I'm sorry we've made you feel like you lost us," Conner said.

"You're my children, but other people's heroes," Charlotte said. "Any mother would be lucky to be in my shoes, but that doesn't mean they're easy to wear. Sometimes at the end of the day, I just have to pretend you're both asleep in your beds."

Charlotte dabbed the corners of her eyes with her napkin. Alex and Conner couldn't blame their mom for wishing things were different—they did, too. The twins put so much time and effort into ending people's suffering, they didn't realize how much their own mother was hurting. But if their mom was willing, she was about to become more involved in their lives than she was prepared for.

"Now tell me what's going on in the fairy-tale world," Charlotte said.

“And how in the world am I going to help you with it?”

Alex and Conner were relieved they could continue discussing their plan. Both opened their mouths to fill her in, but they were at a loss for words. After all, it was a complicated thing to explain. So much of it involved their uncle Lloyd, and they didn’t want to overwhelm their mom with news of an evil brother-in-law.

“Long story short, a really terrible man has taken over the fairy-tale world,” Conner said. “They call him the Masked Man.”

“How’d he take over?” Charlotte asked.

“He stole a potion from Grandma that turns every written work into a portal to the world it describes,” Alex said. “He traveled into *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and *Peter Pan*. Somehow he recruited the Queen of Hearts, the Wicked Witch of the West, Captain Hook, and all their minions and soldiers into a big Literary Army and attacked all the kingdoms.”

“That sounds *terrifying*,” Bob said. “Those villains used to give me nightmares when I was a kid.”

“They’re much worse in real life,” Conner said. “Imagine how scary you *thought* they were, now double that image, cover it in butter, and leave it outside for a week—*that’s* how frightening they really are!”

“Why can’t the Fairy Council do something? Why does it always have to fall on your shoulders?” Charlotte asked.

“The Fairy Council has been turned to stone, and all the soldiers in all the kingdoms are no match for the Literary Army,” Alex said. “If we don’t find a way to stop them, no one will.”

Charlotte hated that so much responsibility had fallen on her children’s young shoulders.

“For the record, I am *not* okay with you two fighting these guys,” Charlotte said. “But how are you going to stop them?”

Alex nudged Conner. “Tell her *your* plan,” she said.

Conner didn’t appreciate his sister’s unenthusiastic introduction. “We’re going to recruit our own army,” he said. “We’re going to use the same potion to travel into my short stories and bring back my characters.”

Charlotte and Bob couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

“Oh my gosh!” Charlotte said. “Is that really the only thing you can do?”

“Trust me, I wish I could file a report at the Pentagon,” Conner said. “Sometimes you’ve got to fight fire with fire.”

“I still don’t see how I fit into all of this,” Charlotte said.

The moment had finally come for the twins to tell her. It was such an absurd request, the twins were afraid to ask. If she refused, they weren’t sure who could help them.

“We need you to look after Conner’s characters as we bring them out of his stories,” Alex said.

It was like someone pressed the Pause button on Charlotte and Bob. Without breathing or blinking, they just looked at the twins with open mouths and large eyes. They weren’t taking it well.

Conner waved his hand in front of their faces. “Are you still with us?” he asked.

“Sorry,” Bob said. “It’s just—most parents of fifteen-year-olds only worry about getting asked for money to go to the movies, or driving permits.”

Conner sat up excitedly. *“Oh-my-God-Alex-we’re-old-enough-for-driving-permits!”* he said in one breath.

“One crisis at time, remember?” Alex said. “So, Mom and Bob, can you help us?”

Bob and Charlotte looked at each other and shrugged.

“If it’ll save the fairy-tale world, I won’t object,” Bob said.

“What *kinds* of characters are going to be in my house?” Charlotte asked. “We just had the carpets cleaned.”

“Oh, nothing crazy—*pirates, cyborgs, superheroes, mummies*—the usual fictional suspects,” Conner said under his breath. “So, does that mean you guys are in?”

The twins held their breath. Charlotte was hesitant, but it might have been more concerning if she were completely fine with the idea.

“All right,” she said. “It’ll be an adventure.”

The twins were so relieved, they sank a foot into their seats.

“Awesome!” Conner said.

“Fantastic!” Alex said.

Bob and Charlotte glanced down at the Storybook Grill menus, but it was a very difficult conversation to follow with French fries and hamburgers. They both pushed the menus away.

“You know what, I think I’ve lost my appetite,” Charlotte said. “Maybe we should go home and I’ll cook something later.”

“I agree,” Bob said.

The twins weren’t going to argue. They left the Storybook Grill with Bob and Charlotte and headed back home. All of them were completely unaware that their entire conversation had been heard by the patrons in the next booth.

The Book Huggers leaned so far out of their seats to watch them leave that Cindy and Mindy fell onto the floor. The night had consisted of the most important eavesdropping of their lives.

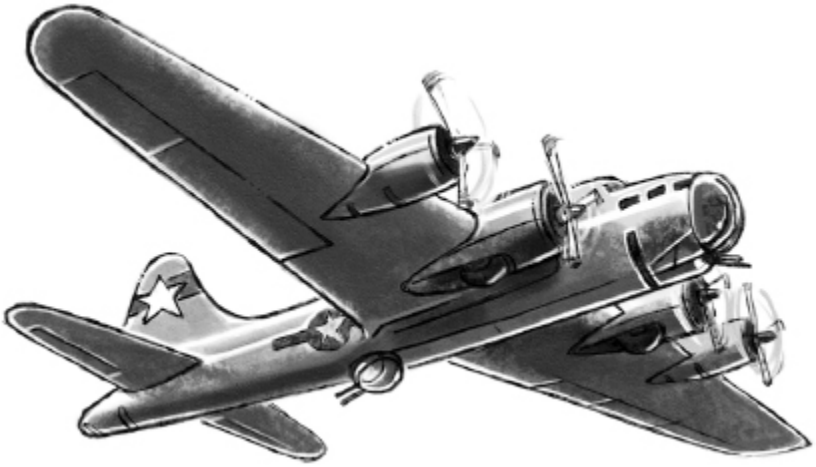
“Girls, did you hear everything I just heard?” Cindy said.

“I’m not sure,” Lindy said. “My heart started beating so hard toward the end, I only heard every other word!”

“We’ve been right all along!” Mindy said. “They never went to Vermont—they were living in another dimension! Did any of us ever think of that?”

Wendy raised a hand—reminding the group it had been one of her suspicions from the very beginning.

“Forget Sherlock Holmes,” Cindy said. “We’ve got our own mystery to follow.”



Chapter Five

CRIES FROM THE CASTLE

Had someone told Bree Campbell two weeks ago that she would soon be flying above another continent on a World War II plane with three distant relatives, she would have laughed. Ironically, that's exactly where Bree was, and she wanted to cry. She had always considered herself a person of good judgment and respectability, but as she bounced around the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress thirteen thousand feet in the air, somewhere between France and Germany, Bree suddenly felt like the lead character in a cautionary tale.

"Can you believe I haven't flown one of these since the sixties?" Cornelia called from the captain's seat. The old woman's hands clutched the controls, but from the way they jerked her back and forth, it looked like the plane was controlling her more than she was controlling it.

Bree, Wanda, and Frenda were strapped into their seats and holding on for dear life. They had been flying for nine hours straight, and thanks to Cornelia's questionable piloting skills, it had been the bumpiest flight of Bree's life. And from the way things were going, it might be her last.

"Aunt Cornelia, are you sure you don't need a hand up there?" Wanda asked.

"I'm fine, thank you, dear," Cornelia said. "It's just like riding a bike!"

"Yeah, *off a cliff*," Frenda said.

When Bree first met the Sisters Grimm and heard about their lives' work monitoring portals between the Otherworld and the fairy-tale world, she thought they were the most capable group of women she had ever known. However, she was learning the hard way that that capability did not include flying a plane.

"Cornelia, remind me again where you went to piloting school?" Bree asked.

“Well, *technically* I never went to school for it,” Cornelia said. “My father was a pilot during the war—this was his plane. He taught me how to fly when I was about your age, Bree. He flew this baby to Germany many times. Thank goodness we’re going under different circumstances.”

“Your father fought in World War II?” Bree asked. “That must have been difficult with so much family in Germany.”

“Most of our family left long before the war,” Cornelia said. “Would you like a flying lesson, Bree?”

Bree wasn’t convinced Cornelia knew how to fly, let alone give a flying lesson. She looked to Wanda and Frenda, and they motioned for her to go.

“You can’t be any worse than her!” Frenda said.

“Learn everything she knows and save us!” Wanda said.

Bree was scared to unbuckle her seat belt, but she quickly unfastened it and dashed to the co-pilot seat beside Cornelia. There was an overwhelming number of buttons, switches, and levers before her.

“I don’t think I can do this,” Bree said.

“If you can operate that phone of yours so well, this will be a walk in the park,” Cornelia said. “Besides, the co-pilot’s job is the easiest.”

“Wait a second,” Bree said. “There should be *two* pilots flying this plane?”

“Traditionally,” Cornelia said. “But it always takes two men to do what a woman can do on her own.”

Bree would never have gotten on the plane if she’d thought it would lead to this. She was making the trip to save a friend, but who was going to save her?

As soon as she learned Emmerich had been kidnapped, Bree had a strong feeling it wasn’t a normal Otherworld abduction. She had no evidence to support the suspicion, but she felt it with every fiber of her being and couldn’t shake it no matter how hard she tried. Bree had pestered Frau Himmelsbach for more information about the incident, but Emmerich’s mother grew tired of the questions and eventually ignored her calls. Bree had shared her hunch with the Sisters Grimm, and they agreed the circumstances were fishy.

“It is curious he was kidnapped so soon after being in the fairy-tale world,” Cornelia said.

“If he was taken by someone from the fairy-tale world, we have tools

that can prove it," Wanda told Bree.

"What kind of tools?" Bree asked.

"Cross-dimensional emission-tracking devices," Frenda said. "Whenever someone or something travels between worlds, the portal leaves a radiation-like scent on them. We have machines that can detect it."

"Awesome," Bree said. "All we need now is a way to get to Germany."

Cornelia had been cooped up in their Connecticut home for so long, she was looking for any excuse to get out of the house. She generously offered Bree a ride to Germany on their family plane. Bree was so desperate to find Emmerich, she didn't hesitate to take her up on the offer.

There was only one thing standing in her way: Bree had technically run away from home to find the Sisters Grimm. If she was now going to Europe, she needed a really good excuse so her parents wouldn't call the police. Luckily, Cornelia supplied that as well.

"Is this Little Eddy?" Cornelia had said to Bree's father over the phone. "It's your cousin Cornelia.… I know, it *has* been a very long time.… Darling, I'm calling to sincerely apologize to you and your wife. You see, Bree recently called me with questions about our family heritage. She was so interested, I invited her to come stay with me so I could tell her more.… Well, I *just* found out she never ran it by you.… My thoughts *exactly*—inexcusable! I'm sure you were both scared to death.… My intention was to send her home immediately, but I unfortunately had a bad fall this morning and injured my hip.… No, I'm not in any pain.… *Yes*, there is something you can do.… Would it be terrible if Bree stayed with me until the end of the week? I'm useless on my own.… Just until Wanda gets back into town, then we'll put her on the train home.… She's been such help.… You bet, absolutely no privileges whatsoever.… *Thank you so much, dear!*"

The next thing Bree knew, she and the Sisters Grimm were on their way to a small private airport. However, Bree, Wanda, and Frenda all thought Cornelia had hired a pilot to take them to Germany. They didn't realize Cornelia was planning to *fly the plane herself* until she switched on the propellers and launched them into takeoff.

Now, at just fifteen years old, Bree was sitting next to the old woman, being taught to fly the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress. If Bree lived long enough to become an old woman herself, she wasn't sure her grandchildren would even believe the story she was currently living.

“Taking off is the easy part,” Cornelia instructed. “You simply start the propellers with the blue dial, turn the red gear to Steering Mode to get the plane onto the runway, push down the green lever, and pull up on the controls.”

Bree gulped. “Blue dial, red gear, green lever, controls,” she repeated.

“Perfect,” Cornelia said. “To fly, all you do is pull up on the green lever, turn the red gear to Flight Mode, adjust the altitude with the brown handle, and steer with the controls. Here, *give it a go*!”

Cornelia flipped a switch and the whole plane turned off. They entered a rapid descent toward the earth! Bree watched in panic as the numbers on the altitude monitor dropped hundreds of feet per second. Wanda and Frenda were screaming so loudly, she could barely focus.

“Green lever, red gear, brown handle, controls!” Bree said, mimicking everything Cornelia had just instructed.

The Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress stopped plunging toward the ground and glided smoothly through the clouds. In fact, it was flying much more easily with Bree at the controls.

“You’re a natural flier!” Cornelia said. “It’s in our DNA.”

Bree thought there might be some truth to this. Since the magic in their family’s blood came from Mother Goose, she wondered if a few of Mother Goose’s flying genes had been transferred, too. There was actually a lot about Cornelia that reminded Bree of Mother Goose. They both had the same twinkle in their eye when they put others in danger.

“How much longer until we’re on the ground?” Wanda asked. “*Safely* on the ground!”

“We’ve already begun our descent,” Cornelia said. “We’ll land shortly after we pass over Füssen.”

Bree recalled that the area didn’t have many large cities. “Does Füssen have an airport?” she asked.

“We don’t need an airport to land,” Cornelia said. “To quote Coco Chanel, ‘The world is your runway’!”

“Mother, she was talking about fashion!” Frenda yelled.

“Everyone stop worrying! This baby is built for combat,” Cornelia said.

They didn’t care what it was built for; landing a plane anywhere but at an airport sounded like a *crash landing* to them! Bree, Wanda, and Frenda tightened their seat belts until there was no slack left. Soon the small

Bavarian city of Füssen came into view and Cornelia searched the ground for a smooth surface to land.

"That field should do," she said.

Cornelia jerked the controls and the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress curved through the air, lowering toward a grassy field below. As the plane turned, Bree caught a glimpse of Neuschwanstein Castle peeking through the hills in the distance. It was as if she were seeing an old friend. The castle was just as majestic as it was the first time she saw it with Conner on Mary's Bridge.

"All right, time for your landing lesson," Cornelia said. "You start by turning the red gear to Landing Mode, pull up on the green lever, turn the black knob to put down the wheels, and pull up on the controls so we're parallel to the ground."

"Red gear, green lever, black knob, controls—got it," Bree said.

"Splendid," Cornelia said. "Now land us."

Bree, Frenda, and Wanda were horrified. It was like Cornelia had a death wish or something!

"What? But I've never landed a plane before!" Bree said.

The plane was getting closer and closer to the ground—someone had to land it before it was too late! Cornelia looked over her glasses at Bree with total faith in her eyes.

"Sometimes, if we enter situations that scare us with both hands on the wheel, they don't seem as frightening," she said as calmly as ever. "Or in this case, *with both hands on the controls*."

Bree couldn't believe Cornelia was making her do this. She could feel her heart beating in the back of her throat. One wrong move and they would all be dead!

Carefully and quickly, Bree turned the red gear to Landing Mode, pulled up on the green lever, turned the black knob to put the wheels down, and held up the controls to make the plane parallel to the ground.

"We're gonna crash!" Wanda yelled, and vigorously crossed her chest.

"Wanda, you're not Catholic!" Frenda said.

"I know, but we're gonna need all the help we can get!"

The wheels slammed into the grassy field and the plane landed like a rock skipping across a lake. It tore up large strips of earth, as if leaving a long message in Morse code. Finally, the plane decelerated and rolled into a

shaky, sudden stop.

"Oh my God," Bree said in disbelief. "I just landed a plane!"

"Mother, how could you let a fifteen-year-old land a plane!" Frenda said.

Cornelia burst into a fit of giggles. "You're all so gullible," she said. "I had the autopilot on the entire time!"

The others didn't find this funny at all.

"You mean, all that was for nothing?" Bree asked with an angry scowl.

"No, no—you did quite well," Cornelia said. "Had the autopilot failed, we would have had a successful landing. My father did the same thing to me on my first flight. The best lessons are learned when it's *sink or swim*, and you're quite the swimmer!"

Once their hearts settled to a normal pace, Bree and the Sisters Grimm locked up the plane and headed for Emmerich's house. Bree thought leaving the plane unattended in a field was a strange thing to do, but Cornelia assured her that planes were very difficult to steal.

Bree led the women through the outskirts of Füssen and into the little village just below Neuschwanstein Castle called Hohenschwangau. Since Cornelia walked with a cane, Bree was worried the journey would be too much for her, but the old woman hobbled along, excited to be on another Sisters Grimm adventure. They walked past all the souvenir shops, restaurants, and inns dedicated to the castle, and found the Himmelsbachs' tiny home on the edge of town.

"There it is," Bree said, and pointed to the front steps. "That's where Conner and I met him."

The sight made Bree feel remarkably nostalgic. It seemed like just yesterday that she and Conner had told Emmerich they were secret agents so he'd take them into the castle after visiting hours. They hadn't been friends for long, but Bree and Emmerich had shared such an incredible once-in-a-lifetime adventure, she couldn't believe there was a time when the little German boy was a stranger. She just hoped they could bring him home, wherever he was.

"Here goes nothing," Bree said. "I hope Frau Himmelsbach is better at answering her door than she is her phone."

They walked up the front steps and rang the doorbell. They waited, but no one answered. Bree rang the doorbell again, holding it down longer. A

moment later, Frau Himmelsbach answered the door.

"Kann ich Dir helfen?" she asked.

If Bree hadn't recognized her voice from the phone, she wouldn't have thought it was Emmerich's mother. The woman had brown hair and olive skin, very different from her son's pale skin and rosy complexion. She had puffy eyes and sunken cheeks, like she had been crying and not eating much. She wore a big black robe over a nightgown and probably hadn't changed clothes in days.

The woman wasn't what Bree was expecting, but she definitely looked like the mother of a missing child.

"Frau Himmelsbach, I'm sorry to disturb you," Bree said. "I'm Bree Campbell, your son's friend from the United States."

Emmerich's mother was not happy to see her, and especially not happy to see she had brought friends with her.

"What is wrong with you, child?" the Frau said. "I told you to stop calling me and now you've come to my home?"

"I'm sorry," Bree said. "I know you don't want to talk to me, but I couldn't stay away. These are my cousins, Cornelia, Frenda, and Wanda. We've traveled all this way because we want to help you find your son."

Frau Himmelsbach crossed her arms and shook her head. She wasn't easy to convince.

"You Americans and your egos," she said. "What can you do that the Bavarian police cannot?"

Bree looked to the Sisters Grimm, hoping one of them would have an answer.

"We're private investigators who specialize in child abduction," Cornelia said. "We've brought special equipment along with us that may point us in the direction of whoever took your child."

"The police searched every inch of my home," the Frau said. "They didn't find a single clue."

"With all due respect, ma'am," Wanda said, "the Bavarian police can't find clues like we can. Please, may we come inside?"

The distressed mother looked back and forth among the women and tried to think of a reason not to let them, but she couldn't.

"Fine," she said. "I apologize, my house is a mess."

Frau Himmelsbach escorted Bree and the Sisters Grimm inside her

home. The Frau offered them a seat in the sitting room and Cornelia and Bree happily accepted. From the sofa they could see into Emmerich's bedroom through an open door in the hall. The walls were covered in posters of superheroes. Bree remembered him saying he wanted to visit the United States because that's where all the superheroes lived. The memory made her miss him even more.

"May we have a look around?" Frenda asked.

"As you wish," the Frau said.

Frenda and Wanda went to work right away. They each removed a cross-dimensional emission-tracking device from their purse; the device looked like a long microphone connected to an old radio. They waved the microphone parts around the house and the radio parts beeped as they went.

They searched the sitting room and kitchen, but didn't find anything. The search continued in Emmerich's bedroom, and when they scanned the area by his window, the machines beeped like crazy. Wanda looked to Bree and Cornelia and with one nod she said a thousand words—*someone from the fairy-tale world had definitely been there*. Bree's hunch was right.

"Was Emmerich taken through the window?" Frenda asked.

"Yes," Frau Himmelsbach said, surprised they knew. "The night it happened, Emmerich was sleeping in his bedroom while I was in here reading. I heard a noise, so I checked on him. His window was open and in the distance I saw someone in a black cloak running away with Emmerich over their shoulder."

She broke into tears recalling the terrifying sight and Cornelia offered her a handkerchief.

"I chased them, but they disappeared into the night," the Frau said. "I called the police and they came to the house every day for a week. They never found anything, not even a fingerprint. How did you know he was taken from the window?"

If they were going to tell the Frau the truth, Bree figured it was best to start at the beginning.

"Shortly before Emmerich was taken, he and I made a crazy discovery," Bree said. "We did this thing, like a *blood test*, and it proved he and I are actually *related*. Our blood matches DNA from the Brothers Grimm."

"The Brothers Grimm?" the Frau asked.

"Yes," Bree continued. "Which means Cornelia, Frenda, Wanda, and

myself are either related to you or to Emmerich's father."

The Frau was very confused. "I wouldn't know either way," she said. "Emmerich isn't my biological son—he was adopted."

"Adopted?" Bree said in shock. "He never mentioned that."

"That's because I never told him," Frau Himmelsbach said. "He was abandoned when he was a baby. I didn't want him living life thinking he was unwanted."

Everything Bree thought she knew suddenly changed. She quickly abandoned her plan to tell the Frau about the fairy-tale world—clearly she didn't have all the facts straight.

"Where was he found?" Bree asked.

"Neuschwanstein Castle," she said. "My father used to work nights there as a security guard. One night, as he was patrolling the halls, he heard crying. He followed the cries to the Singers' Hall and found Emmerich wrapped up in a blanket in the middle of the floor. Someone must have left him during a tour earlier in the day. It was very strange, because my father swore he had checked the room multiple times earlier that night and never saw the baby."

Bree and the Sisters Grimm were all thinking the same thing: Emmerich wasn't related to the Brothers Grimm after all—*he was from the fairy-tale world*! Someone must have crossed through the portal in the Singers' Hall and left him in the castle!

The Frau's eyes suddenly grew wide and she covered her mouth fearfully.

"Wait a moment," she said. "That reminds me of something I completely forgot! There was a note pinned to his blanket the night he was found. Let me see if I can find it."

Emmerich's mom went down the hall to her bedroom. They heard her searching madly through all her drawers and belongings. A few minutes later, she returned with a piece of parchment. Her hands were shaking, as if she were holding a ransom note. She handed it to Bree, and the Sisters Grimm gathered around her to read the note.

To whoever finds this child, please take him to a loving home that will offer protection. His father is a very dangerous man

and the child is not safe with his mother. Should the father learn of his son's existence, the child will be in grave danger.

It appeared that Bree and the Sisters Grimm had helped the Frau uncover a suspect in her son's disappearance—*Emmerich's biological father*!

"It was so many years ago, I forgot the note existed," Frau Himmelsbach confessed. "Even then, I didn't take it seriously. I never thought they would find him."

"Should we take this to the police?" Wanda asked.

"No, we can't!" the Frau exclaimed. "You see, I never *legally* adopted Emmerich. I fell in love with him the minute my father brought him home. At the time, we were very poor. I was afraid he would be taken away if we called the police, so we kept it a secret. If they found out now, I would never see him again."

Bree had so many questions, she could barely see straight. She always loved a good mystery novel, but she never thought her life would turn into one.

"If you're related to him, do you have any idea who Emmerich's parents are?" Frau Himmelsbach asked. "Do you know where they might have taken him?"

"I'm afraid not," Bree said. "But I know someone who might."

Chapter Six

A BEWITCHING OFFER

The Masked Man was awoken by a throbbing headache. He opened his eyes and discovered he was somewhere in the forest, but he had no recollection of how he had gotten there. Even stranger, when he looked around he noticed the ground was above his head and the smoky sky was below his feet.

After further inspection, he realized he was upside down. His cape was caught on a tree branch and he was hanging several feet in the air. As he slowly returned to full consciousness, the Masked Man remembered that flying monkeys had dropped him there. He wasn't sure how long he had been hanging in the tree, but since he was still alive, he assumed his cape must have broken his fall.

He reached toward the branch piercing his cape to set himself free. The motion sent excruciating pain through his entire body and he screamed. The pain was so bad, he couldn't tell where it began or ended. Clearly, he had hit more than one branch on his way down. The Masked Man tugged on his cape and it ripped in half. He fell to the ground and landed on his back with a *thud*.

After a few minutes of lying on the ground, the Masked Man had a better idea of where the pain was coming from. His left arm was definitely broken, one of his right ribs was most likely cracked, and his right ankle was sprained at best. Half his mask had been ripped off by something he collided with during the fall, and bloody scratches covered one side of his face. Still, it was a miracle he had survived.

He moaned as he struggled to his feet. All the blood in his head rushed to the other parts of his body, making him woozy. He removed his damaged cape and ripped his suit jacket into strips to make a sling for his arm.

The physical pain was unbearable, but he was almost thankful for it—it was the only thing distracting him from his mental anguish.

The Masked Man was not a stranger to disappointment, but *losing an empire* was one colossal setback he never saw coming. After a lifetime of meticulous planning, he had finally achieved the power he had craved since childhood. Only to then have it yanked away like a rug from underneath him.

After such a narrow escape from death, a different man would have abandoned his quest for supremacy, but the Masked Man's need for power was like a disease—and *fulfillment* was the only cure. Like a phoenix, he immediately began calculating his path out of the ashes. Somehow, some way, he would reclaim his power and destroy the literary villains who had taken it from him. But first, he needed to find a path out of the forest.

The Masked Man had no idea what part of the forest he had been dropped in, so he hobbled through the trees in search of an indication. After hours of limping aimlessly through the woods, he only found more and more trees the farther he went. Since the mythological creature had escaped captivity in the Northern Palace dungeon, the Masked Man was as cautious and quiet as possible just in case it was also wandering through the forest.

Eventually he stumbled upon a small clearing with three unusual boulders. They were tall and stuck out from the ground like trees themselves. The Masked Man had a seat against one of the boulders and tightened his makeshift sling. But his rest was short-lived.

A commotion traveled through the woods nearby. The sound became louder and louder as it moved closer and closer. It was a repetitive tremor, like the marching of several pairs of metal boots—*Winkie soldiers were approaching*! The Masked Man assumed the villains must have sent the soldiers to retrieve his body. He was too wounded to outrun them, so he dived into the bushes beside the boulders and was hidden from view.

A few moments later, two rows of a dozen Winkie soldiers entered the clearing, but they weren't alone. The soldiers were escorting the Wicked Witch of the West, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook through the forest. The sight of the literary villains sent a rage through the Masked Man that was so powerful, his injuries were temporarily numbed. There wasn't a word in existence to describe the anger coursing through his veins.

The Wicked Witch of the West, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook

paced around the clearing like they were waiting for something to happen. They didn't appear to be looking for the Masked Man, so he wondered what on earth they were doing in the woods.

"Well?" Captain Hook growled. "Where is she?"

"Are we certain we're in the right place?" the Queen of Hearts asked.

The Wicked Witch of the West unrolled a scroll of parchment she held tightly in her hand.

"I'm positive," the Wicked Witch said. "Her instructions say, 'Take the path four miles into the Dwarf Forests and wait for me in the clearing of the three stone trees.' There hasn't been another clearing for miles. This must be it."

As the Masked Man knew all too well, *patience* was not the villains' forte. The Wicked Witch, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook became more restless by the second.

"Well, *whoever* she is, I don't like her," Captain Hook snarled. "She has some nerve to keep us waiting like this."

"I want to hear what she's offering," the Queen of Hearts said. "But if it isn't appealing, and we've come all this way for nothing, *I say we capture her and—*"

"Cut off her head?" the Wicked Witch asked mockingly. "There are *other ways* to execute someone, you know—most of which are more entertaining and far less messy."

"Like dropping the Masked Man to his death?" Captain Hook said with a nasty grin. "Watching him squirm and scream as he fell was rather fun, wasn't it? If only gravity affected *everyone*—my hook would be covered in Peter Pan's blood by now!"

The Queen of Hearts rolled her eyes. "I'm so sick of hearing that boy's name!" she hollered. "He's a child, Captain! *Let it go!* From the way you obsessively talk about him, I'd say he's taken much more from you than *just your hand*!"

Captain Hook intended to respond with a snippy comment, but the pirate went quiet. He leaned against one of the boulders and placed his hook on his hip, thinking about what the Queen of Hearts had just said.

From the bushes just beside Captain Hook, the Masked Man had a perfect view of a revolver dangling from the captain's belt. He was drawn to the weapon like a moth to a flame. If he got his hands on it, with three

quick shots he could terminate the literary villains before the Winkie soldiers knew what was happening!

Carefully, when they were all looking in the opposite direction, the Masked Man reached his good hand toward the captain's waist and unfastened his holster.

It was a painful effort with his cracked rib and it took everything in him not to scream. Slowly, he removed the revolver from the holster with the captain none the wiser.

The Masked Man examined the gun—*it had three bullets*! He had exactly what he needed to shoot the villains! He cocked it and aimed the weapon back and forth at the three of them, indecisive about which one to kill first.

Captain Hook became agitated and started stomping around the clearing.

"I knew it was a trick!" he said in a huff. "We've been fooled! No one is meeting us in the woods today!"

The Queen of Hearts and the Wicked Witch nodded in agreement. But just as they were about to order the soldiers to take them back, they were interrupted by a voice from outside the clearing.

"Haven't you ever heard the phrase 'Good things come to those who wait'?"

The Masked Man lowered the revolver when he heard the voice. It sounded awfully familiar.

The villains and the Winkie soldiers heard footsteps next and quickly turned to see a hooded creature approaching them. The soldiers raised their staffs toward the creature, but with a quick flick of its wrist, their weapons crumbled into dirt. The creature stepped into the clearing and lowered its hood—it was a beautiful woman with horns like a ram's that curved around the sides of her face.

"Morina," the Masked Man whispered to himself. His desire to assassinate the villains was quickly replaced by curiosity. What did *she* want with them?

"Are you the witch they call Morina?" the Wicked Witch of the West asked.

"I am," Morina said. "And you must be the new leaders of this world. It's an honor to make your acquaintance. Defeating the kingdoms of humans and fairies is no easy task—you've achieved what the witches have

only dreamed about for centuries."

The villains shared a proud look and stood a little taller.

"Since you're here, I'm assuming you received my letter?" Morina asked.

"It's not every day we receive an invitation delivered by a crow," the Queen of Hearts said. "Now tell us, what is the 'offer of a lifetime' that you wrote about?"

"It requires a lengthy explanation," Morina said. "Please, have a seat."

The witch waved her hand toward the three boulders and they transformed into large stone chairs for the villains to sit on. So far, the witch was very impressive.

"You see, the witches of this world have always had a long and unpleasant history with the people who ruled it," Morina explained. "Before you arrived there were rumors of an impending witch hunt. Those fears were all but confirmed when the Masked Man became emperor. We were certain that once he executed the royal families, it would only be a matter of time before he ordered our extermination. But luckily, that's all changed now that you've taken his place."

"If the Masked Man saw the witches as a threat, why should we view things any differently?" Captain Hook asked.

"Because the three of you are much wiser than your predecessors," Morina said. "Why become enemies when we have a glorious opportunity to become *allies*?"

The villains side-eyed one another. They weren't pleased with where the conversation was going.

"For your sake, I hope you're offering us more than *friendship*," the Queen of Hearts warned.

Morina smiled and her eyes grew wide. They could tell friendship was only the beginning of what she had to offer.

"Of course. I'll cut to the chase," she said. "Recently, I convinced the other witches that the only way we could escape the pending genocide was by leaving this world. We need a place to ourselves where we won't be controlled by fairies or ostracized by humans. So I formed a plan for the witches to invade and conquer another dimension, known as *the Otherworld*."

The villains were instantly intrigued. *"The Otherworld?"* they asked in

unison.

"It's a world very similar to this one, but far greater," Morina explained. "It has hundreds of countries, thousands of cities, and billions of people. There are structures and machines you could only dream of, and more land and sea than we would ever need. The best part is that this world operates entirely without magic. With no fairies to limit us, we would be unstoppable!"

Her passionate description was hypnotizing. Still, the villains wondered if it was too good to be true.

"How can you prove it exists?" Captain Hook asked.

"Take a look for yourself," Morina said.

The witch's eyes suddenly lit up like the headlights of a car. Morina magically transferred images of the Otherworld into the villains' minds and their eyes glowed as brightly as hers. Visions of London, Paris, Tokyo, and New York City flashed before their eyes. They saw the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids of Giza, the Great Wall of China, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Taj Mahal.

The villains had never seen a world so grand and diverse before. The light faded from their eyes, but was replaced by the glow of desire.

"How do we get to the Otherworld?" the Wicked Witch asked.

"The late Fairy Godmother has portals hidden all over the kingdoms," Morina said. "But each one is difficult to open, and the journey takes a toll on anyone who's not a practitioner of white magic."

"Then how do the witches expect to cross over?" the Queen of Hearts asked.

"As luck would have it, the two worlds are scheduled to collide very soon," Morina said. "A *doorway* will open that will bridge the worlds like never before. Once it appears, we can charge into the Otherworld and take it by storm!"

The villains' suspicion grew as much as their interest.

"You seem to have it all figured out," Captain Hook said. "What exactly do the witches want from us?"

A devious smile grew on Morina's face. This was the part she was most excited to tell them.

"The witches don't want anything from you," she said.

"Then why do they want to become *allies*?" Captain Hook asked.

“You misheard me, Captain,” Morina said. “The witches don’t even know I’m here. I was speaking for *myself* when I proposed an alliance.”

The villains shared a look, each more confused than the other. Morina waved a hand over the dirt and a fourth boulder shot up from the ground. She transformed it into a large stone throne, much taller than the villains’ chairs, and she had a seat.

“I had every intention of *leading* the witches into the Otherworld,” Morina explained. “Sadly, that leadership was stolen from me. Two witches with seniority, the Snow Queen and the Sea Witch, have taken the operation into their own clammy hands. But my frustration has taught me a valuable lesson: *Witches are not like wolves—we don’t belong in packs.* Once we cross into the Otherworld, we’ll fight one another for dominance until there is only one of us left. So I’ve begun a new plan for *after* the witches conquer the Otherworld.”

The villains shared a smile. Morina’s plan was starting to make sense—and they liked where it was going.

“You’re going to betray them!” the Wicked Witch said eagerly.

“Precisely,” Morina said. “The Snow Queen and the Sea Witch plan to cast a spell on the late Fairy Godmother’s granddaughter, a powerful young fairy named Alex. They believe if they curse her strongly enough, they’ll be able to turn the girl into a weapon and use her to vanquish the Otherworld. I’m not convinced this will work. I believe there are more traditional ways of invading a new territory.”

“You want our army!” the Queen of Hearts said.

Morina clapped her hands excitedly. “Exactly,” she said. “I say we let the witches be our pawns. Let them invade the Otherworld and weaken its defenses. Once they’ve both exhausted all their resources, we’ll charge into the Otherworld and steal it from them! We’ll destroy Alex, the witches, and whatever is left standing in our way!”

It was the most thrilling and lucrative offer the villains had ever received. They were all fidgeting in their seats at the thought of the conquest. However, they still didn’t know if Morina could be trusted.

“How do we know you won’t just betray us in the end, too?” Captain Hook asked.

“We’ve already been deceived once by someone in this world—we won’t let it happen again!” the Wicked Witch said.

“Unlike the Masked Man, I don’t bite off more than I can chew,” Morina said. “We’ll divide the Otherworld evenly among us—we’ll each have our own territory twice the size of this world. Surely that’s more than enough land for each of us. Time is of the essence, so if you’re interested, I need to know now. Do we have a deal, or not?”

The villains huddled together to discuss the situation privately, but Morina could tell they had already made up their minds. They were creatures of greed and couldn’t refuse.

“We have a deal,” Captain Hook said. “But if you disappoint us, we’ll end you just like we ended the Masked Man!”

Morina laughed loudly. “You think you *killed* the Masked Man?” she asked.

“Of course we killed him,” the Queen of Hearts said. “No man could have survived that fall!”

“Yes, but the Masked Man isn’t a man—he’s a *roach*,” Morina said sharply. “Even if you cut off his head, he’d be back the very second a throne was left unattended. We haven’t seen the last of him. But don’t worry, I have something that will bring him to his knees should he try to sabotage our plan.”

“And what is that?” the Wicked Witch asked.

The villains were curious, but not nearly as curious as the Masked Man himself. He had very few possessions—what had the witch stolen?

“Not *what*, but *who*,” Morina said. “I’ve kidnapped his *son*, a boy named Emmerich.”

“The Masked Man has a child?” Captain Hook asked.

“Not one he knows about,” Morina said. “But should he ever cross us, the boy will stop him in his tracks.”

The Masked Man was so shocked, he dropped the revolver. He no longer felt any of his injuries or the anger boiling inside him. He forgot all about losing his empire and his desire to kill the villains. All he could feel was adrenaline and his heartbeat. All he could think about was the *son* he never knew he had.

“I should return to the witches before they get suspicious,” Morina said.

The witch stood from her stone throne and with a snap of her fingers, the boulders all returned to normal. The villains were buzzing with anticipation. If they could invade the Otherworld today, they wouldn’t hesitate.

“When will the invasion take place?” the Queen of Hearts asked. “We want our soldiers to be prepared.”

“It won’t be long now,” Morina said. “When the time is right, we’ll strike. I’ll be in touch.”

The witch covered her horns with her hood and disappeared into the trees. The villains ordered the Winkie soldiers to escort them out of the woods and practically skipped back to the Northern Palace.

The Masked Man was still so astonished, he stayed in the bushes long after the villains were gone. Having a son presented him with a world of new opportunities—opportunities he had never thought possible. If he played his cards right, the Masked Man could regain much more than just his empire—he could salvage *everything* that had been stolen from him.…

Chapter Seven

THE CAPTAIN AND HER CREW

I packed you both a turkey sandwich, chips, yogurt, a banana, two bottles of water, and a cookie," Charlotte said. "There's also a sweatshirt, a flashlight, a Swiss Army knife, a first-aid kit, matches, and a compass."

The twins' mother handed them each a backpack full of the items she'd packed. Alex and Conner appreciated the gesture, but traveling into a fictitious dimension was very different from going on a camping trip.

"Thanks, Mom," Alex said. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yeah, this isn't our first rodeo," Conner said, and looked through his backpack. *"Oh cool, chocolate chip! Thanks!"*

"It's just a few things—I'll feel better knowing you have them," Charlotte said. "So where's your first stop? Any idea how long you'll be gone for?"

Alex turned to Conner, just as curious as their mother. For the first time in their lives, she was leaving all the planning to her brother. She had offered to help a number of times, but Conner was determined to do everything himself. Not insisting was a gamble on Alex's part, but he seemed very confident he had everything taken care of.

"First up is my short story 'Starboardia,'" Conner said excitedly. "It's a pirate adventure set in the Caribbean Sea around the early 1700s. The story's about Captain Auburn Sally and her all-female crew as they search deserted islands for buried treasure."

Charlotte hid her concern behind a smile. "Sounds *progressive*," she said.

"Don't worry—we'll be fine," Conner said. "Auburn Sally is based on Goldilocks. We'll find her ship, tell her the situation, and bring her and her crew back to the house. It'll be easy."

“If you say so,” Charlotte said, unconvinced.

“Go get ’em,” Bob said, and patted him on the back.

Conner had organized his writing neatly in a binder with tabs separating the short stories. He opened the binder to the first page of “Starboardia” and set it on the living room floor.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything we need before we go?” Alex asked one final time. “There’s nothing you’re overlooking or forgetting about?”

“Trust me. I’ve got everything under control,” he said. “If there’s one thing I know inside out, it’s my short stories. I’ve actually been really looking forward to this. I bet my characters will be excited to meet me!”

Traveling into the short stories had been all Conner could think about since he’d first had the idea. Naturally, the circumstances to warrant the trip were terrible, but he still felt like the luckiest author in the world. Who else got to visit the worlds and meet the people that existed only in their imagination? Conner often fantasized about seeing a film or a play based on his writing one day, but *this* would be much better than that. It wouldn’t be *someone else’s* interpretation or adaptation of his words; everything would be purely as he’d envisioned it.

Conner removed Mother Goose’s flask, which contained the Portal Potion, from his back pocket. He poured a couple of drops on the binder and then stored the flask safely in his backpack. The pages illuminated like a powerful spotlight, shining a bright beam of light toward the ceiling.

“Here we go!” Conner said. “Wish us luck!”

“Good luck!” Bob said. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

“Make good choices!” Charlotte said. “There’s also some sunscreen in your bags if it’s sunny out!”

Alex and Conner strapped on their backpacks, stepped into the beam of light, and disappeared from the house.

Just like it had when they traveled into *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Peter Pan*, and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the Portal Potion first took them into an endless space with nothing but words. Rather than printed text, words were *written* all around them, as if there were hundreds of invisible pencils moving through the air. Each word was in Conner’s messy handwriting.

“Awesome!” Conner said. “It’s like we’ve stepped inside my brain!”

“You’ve got to work on your penmanship,” Alex noted.

The handwritten words stretched into shapes, then gained color and texture, and finally transformed into the objects they described. Conner watched in awe as the world of his first short story came to life around him. Alex was excited, too, until she saw the words *ocean waves* stretching below their feet.

"Hey, Conner?" she said. "Should we be worried about—"

Before she could finish her sentence, the twins fell into an ocean that formed under their feet. Strong waves crashed over them, pushing them farther and farther below the water. The water was difficult to swim against, but they kicked their way to the surface and spit out mouthfuls of salty water. Conner saw his binder of short stories floating in the water nearby and retrieved it before the waves carried it away. If he lost the binder, the twins would lose their exit back into the Otherworld.

Alex angrily splashed water in her brother's face. *"Why didn't you say we needed a boat?"* she asked.

"Sorry!" Conner said. "I forgot the first thing I described was the ocean!"

By now the handwritten words had finished forming the world of "Starboardia" around them. They were bobbing up and down in the middle of the Caribbean Sea. The air was so misty, they could barely see each other, let alone any land or ships in the distance. Alex snapped her fingers and a small wooden rowboat appeared in front of them.

The twins climbed aboard and caught their breath. Conner put the binder in his backpack, where it would be safe. If anything happened to it, they would have no way back home.

"Well, *that* was a rough start," Alex said. "What's the *second* thing you described?"

"The *Dolly Llama*," Conner said.

"The Dolly Llama?"

"It's the name of Auburn Sally's ship," he said. "Don't judge me, I thought it was a funny name for a ship. We should see it any minute now."

A towering shadow appeared in the mist—something very large headed their way. The shadow grew larger and darker and details formed as it got closer. Finally, the twins saw that it was a pirate ship sailing straight toward their rowboat with no sign of slowing down. It was going to plow right into them!

"Abandon boat!" Conner yelled.

The twins dived into the water just as the ship smashed into their rowboat, crushing it to pieces. Once again, Alex and Conner were caught under the vicious waves. They swam to the surface and were sloshed around the choppy water as the pirate ship sailed right past them.

"Ahoy!" Conner yelled up at the ship. *"Twins overboard! Help us!"*

A few seconds later, a rope ladder was rolled off the ship, and it landed in the water next to the twins. They grabbed it, climbed up, pulled themselves over the ship's railing, and collapsed onto the lower deck. They were drenched and coughing up seawater.

Alex looked up and saw a large black flag flying above the ship with a llama skull on it.

"This must be the *Dolly Llama*," Alex said. She pointed out the flag to Conner, and a giant smile grew on his face. He leaped to his feet and helped his sister to hers. The flag was proof they were in his short story.

"We made it!" he exclaimed. "Alex, we're in 'Starboardia'!"

His excitement was cut short when they heard footsteps nearby. A dozen female pirates surrounded Alex and Conner, and they didn't look friendly. The pirates pointed their swords and rifles at the twins.

"Well, well, well," said a woman with an eye patch. "Look what we have here."

"What are you two scallywags doing in the middle of the sea?" asked a woman with enormous lips. "Too *young* to be in the navy, too *fair* to be pirates."

Conner almost stepped on a pirate behind him and jumped. Having no legs, the pirate walked on her hands and held a dagger with her teeth.

"My guess is they were *stowaways*!" the legless pirate said. "I'm surprised the sharks didn't find them first!"

Conner couldn't believe his characters were living and breathing before his eyes. The women were just as rough, dirty, and sunburned as he had imagined them. He grinned from ear to ear and jumped up and down.

"I'm so happy to see you guys!" he said.

The pirates tilted their heads at him like confused puppies. No one had ever been *happy* to see them before.

"Guys, it's *me*!" Conner said. "I'm Conner Bailey!"

The pirates raised their eyebrows and scratched their heads—should

they know who he was?

"Who?" asked a pirate with a round, flat face.

"Oh, come on." Conner laughed. "I'm the *author*!"

"Author of *what*?" asked a pirate with bare feet.

"Of *this story*," he said. "I created this ocean, I created this ship, and I created all of you. Do you really not recognize me?"

Conner thought for sure it would have clicked by now, but the pirates still stared at him awkwardly, just as perplexed as before.

"He's been marooned for too long—the boy's gone mad," said a pirate with a peg leg, and the other pirates nodded in agreement.

Conner was getting frustrated. "I'm not crazy," he said. "Look, where is Auburn Sally? Let me talk to her. I'm sure she'll straighten this whole thing out. This is my own fault—I should have written you guys to be smarter."

The pirates stopped looking puzzled and began staring daggers at him. Alex covered her face and let out a sigh—this wasn't going to be as easy as her brother thought.

"*Oooooh, Captain*," the pirate with the eye patch called. "There's someone down here who'd like to have a word with you!"

Suddenly, a woman did a backflip off the upper deck and landed directly in front of the twins. She wore a large black hat, a long brown coat, tall boots, and she had a sword and pistol attached to her thick belt. Alex knew this was Auburn Sally from the minute she laid eyes on her. If her acrobatics weren't enough to give it away, the captain looked exactly like Goldilocks. The only difference in their features was the captain's long locks of auburn hair.

"Sally!" Conner said like he was seeing an old friend—because, technically, he was. He stepped toward the captain to give her a hug, but Auburn Sally quickly drew her pistol and aimed it at his head.

"Am I supposed to know you, *boy*?" Auburn Sally asked.

Conner was shocked by the treatment he was receiving from his own characters. He had expected a warm and gracious welcome, but instead the heroine of his story was holding a gun to his head. Without him none of them would even exist! He wondered if this was what an underappreciated parent felt like.

He held his hands up and backed away from the pistol. "Okay, time out!" he said. "Everyone just calm down and let me explain! My name is

Conner Bailey, and this is my sister, Alex. I know this is hard to believe, but I'm your *creator*! We are living in a short story I wrote for my eighth-grade English class!"

Auburn Sally looked at him with more perplexity than that of all her crew added together. "He's got yellow fever," she said. "Prepare the plank! We need to get him off the ship at once!"

"I'm not sick, either!" Conner said. "Fine! If you don't believe me, I'll prove it!"

He walked around the circle of women, pointing at each pirate.

"That's Winking Wendy, Fish-Lips Lucy, Somersault Sydney, Pancake-Face Patty, Stinky-Feet Phoebe, and that's Peg-Leg Peggy," he said.

"I prefer *Margret*," said the pirate with the peg leg.

"Fine, *Margret*," Conner said, and rolled his eyes. "In the back, that's High-Tide Tabitha, Catfish Kate, Too-Much-Rum Ronda, Big-Booty Bertha, Not-So-Jolly Joan, and up in the crow's nest, that's Siren Sue. Your captain is Auburn Sally, this ship is called the *Dolly Llama*, and you're all searching the Caribbean for buried treasure!"

Conner crossed his arms confidently and waited for their apologies. The pirates were startled by how much he knew. They all looked at their captain, waiting to see how she would respond.

"There's only one explanation for how a young man we've never met before could possibly know so much," Auburn Sally said. "*He's a warlock!* Tie him and his sister up! We'll burn them at the stake on the next island we find!"

Before they knew it, the twins' backpacks were yanked off and they were pushed against the mainmast. The pirates wrapped ropes around their bodies, binding their torsos to the ship. Conner was so mad, he turned bright red.

"Let us go or you'll be sorry!" he yelled. *"Just wait until I get home! I'm going to write a sequel where you all get shipwrecked and have to eat your boots to survive!"*

The pirates laughed at his attempts to scare them. Winking Wendy pulled the ropes even tighter just to spite him.

"Keep it up, Wendy! We'll see who's laughing when I have a seagull peck out your other eye!" Conner warned. "Alex, can you believe this?"

"How did you expect them to react?" she asked. "What would you do if

a guy showed up out of nowhere and told us we were characters in *his* story?"

"I would punch him in the face for making everything so damn difficult!" he said. "Alex, you've got to do something! Zap them with a sleeping spell, turn them into sea horses—*anything!*"

"No!" Alex yelled. "I've been asking you for days if you needed any help planning, and you told me you had *everything under control*! Well, so far we almost drowned, we narrowly missed being crushed by a ship, and now we're being captured by *your* pirates! You and I have different definitions of *under control*!"

"Alex, don't be a child!" Conner said.

"Grow up, Conner!" she said. "This is *your* mess—*you* clean it up!"

"Fine, I will!" he yelled. "I don't need you or your stupid magic! I'll find a way out of this myself!"

Although Alex and Conner were tied up right next to each other, they each pretended the other wasn't there and pouted in silence.

A strong ocean breeze began clearing the mist and uncovered the sun. Soon the ship had a breathtaking view of the ocean surrounding it. There was nothing to see but the bright blue Caribbean Sea for miles around them.

Captain Auburn Sally returned to the upper deck and wrapped her hands around the large helm. She looked out at the open water and a radiant smile spread across her face. There was nothing keeping her back and no one to stop her; she was surrounded by an abundance of freedom and possibilities. Conner remembered writing about that expression—it was the expression he always wished the real Goldilocks could have more often.

"Once again, it's a beautiful day to be a pirate," Auburn Sally said to her crew. "Ladies, *lower the sales*!"

The twins looked up, expecting the sails above them to come down and fill with the ocean air. Instead, Siren Sue peeked out of the crow's nest with a treasure chest full of scarves, jewelry, hooks, and weapons. The other pirates gathered below her with hands full of gold coins.

"You heard the captain—time to lower the sales!" Siren Sue announced. "For a limited time, everything is half off! Scarves are two coins, earrings are four coins, necklaces are six coins, and the rifles are eight coins! Get your accessories while the sales are low!"

Siren Sue sold off the items to the pirates below until there was nothing

left in her chest. The women ogled their new purchases and showed them off to one another. It absolutely baffled Alex, and when she glanced at Conner, he looked just as confused as she did.

"I don't understand what's happening," he said. "I never wrote *that*."

"Did you mean to write *lower the sails*? Like the *normal sails* on a ship?" Alex asked.

"Oops," Conner said. "I must have spelled it wrong."

To his relief, once the *sales* were over, the pirates lowered the *sails*, too. They were made from cream-colored cloth, the exact color of Porridge's coat. They filled with the ocean breeze, and the *Dolly Llama* sailed into the horizon.

Auburn Sally turned the ship's wheel back and forth as she guided her vessel through the rough waters. She kept a watchful eye on the entire horizon around them. The longer the ship sailed, the more a familiar expression grew on her face—one that the twins had seen Goldilocks wear many times when they'd first met her. The captain seemed a little sad, like she was hoping something would appear in the distance, but it never came.

Conner recognized this face, too, and began to worry.

"Oh no," he said. "We're getting close to the part of the story when the navy shows up."

"How can you tell?" Alex asked.

"From the way Auburn Sally is looking out over the ocean longingly," he said. "The pirates are about to get company."

Like clockwork, Siren Sue climbed down from the crow's nest in a panic.

"Captain!" she shouted. "Look, in the east! A ship from the British Navy is approaching!"

Auburn Sally quickly unfolded a long telescope and scanned the eastern horizon. Alex and Conner squinted and could barely see a small speck moving in the distance. The captain smiled as she spotted the ship—this was what she had been hoping for.

"It looks like Admiral Jacobson has finally caught up with us," Auburn Sally announced to her crew.

"Any orders, Captain?" Winking Wendy asked.

"I'm tired of playing the admiral's game of cat and mouse," the captain said. *"Hoist the sails and prepare for battle!"*

The pirates all saluted her and went to work right away. They loaded the cannons on deck and sharpened their swords. The sails were rolled up and the ship slowed down, allowing the admiral's ship to gain on them. The small speck the twins saw in the distance quickly grew into an enormous ship twice the size of the *Dolly Llama*. Soon they could make out a British flag waving from the tallest mast and the ship's name painted along its side: the *Royal Tantrum*.

While the pirates scurried around the deck preparing for battle, the captain gazed at herself in a compact mirror. Auburn Sally applied lipstick and blush, she brushed her hair to give it extra volume, and she wiped off all the smudges on her clothes. The captain wasn't getting ready for *combat*; she was getting ready for a *date*!

"That's how she prepares for battle?" Alex asked her brother.

Conner nodded bashfully. "Just wait," he said. "In about five minutes it's all going to make perfect sense."

When the *Royal Tantrum* was getting close to the *Dolly Llama*, the pirates dropped the sails and sailed around the navy ship. The twins could see that the *Royal Tantrum*'s lower deck was full of British sailors running amok. They spotted Admiral Jacobson standing on the upper deck.

The admiral was posed regally, with one foot on the railing and a long sword in his hand. He was a very handsome man with broad shoulders and pitch-black hair in a neat ponytail. He wore a blue coat with several gold buttons and badges. The closer the pirate ship sailed around the navy ship, the more familiar he seemed.

"Conner, is it just me, or does the admiral look exactly like *Jack*?" Alex asked.

She glanced between the captain and the admiral. Just like her brother said, it all finally made sense.

"Oooooh," Alex said. "I get it now. Auburn Sally is based on Goldilocks, and the admiral is based on Jack. 'Starboardia' is a love story! That's so sweet!"

Conner grunted like his sister had just insinuated something very crude.

"Excuse me," he said defensively. "'Starboardia' is a *pirate adventure*! It might have *elements* of love, but it is absolutely *not* a love story!"

Alex raised an eyebrow at him. *"Sure,"* she said mockingly.

By now, the *Dolly Llama* was sailing around the *Royal Tantrum* with

gusto. The British sailors ran across the deck to watch the pirates circling them. Winking Wendy took the wheel and Auburn Sally went to the railing to see the admiral. She mimicked his pose on the railing of her own ship, and the two commanders locked eyes. If Alex hadn't known there was something between them before, she definitely knew it now.

"Good afternoon, Admiral," Auburn Sally said. "What brings you to this part of the Caribbean today?"

"You're a wanted woman, Auburn Sally," the admiral said.

"You mean, by more than just you?" the captain said playfully. "Honestly, Admiral, you're so persistent, I'm starting to think you have a little crush on me."

The pirates roared with laughter. Even the navy soldiers were amused and covered their mouths to hide their chuckles. The whole scene felt like it should have happened in a high school hallway instead of the Caribbean Sea.

"The entire British Navy is just *smitten* with you, Captain," the admiral said. "They've asked me to personally escort you back to land. Come willingly and I won't sink your ship."

"Admiral, may I remind you I am *literally* sailing circles around you," she said. "It's *your* ship I'm worried about. I'd hate to destroy it and embarrass you in front of all your men. By the way, *nice tights, gentlemen*!"

"So it's going to be the hard way, is it?" Admiral Jacobson said with a grin.

Auburn Sally laughed. "Oh, Admiral," she said, "haven't you learned by now I'm the kind of girl who likes—"

"PLAYING HARD TO GET!" Conner yelled, finishing her sentence.

The captain and her crew quickly turned to him, wondering how on earth he knew exactly what she had been planning to say.

"I told you this is my story," Conner reminded them. "I wrote the cheesy dialogue coming out of your mouths! Would you quit the innuendos and just get to the battle already?"

Auburn Sally glared at him suspiciously for a moment, then turned to face the admiral again.

"I agree with the warlock," she said. *"Ladies, open fire!"*

As the *Dolly Llama* circled the *Royal Tantrum*, it was like the ships were joined together in a dangerous waltz and the pirates were taking the lead.

They lit their cannons and fired them at the navy sailors, blasting large holes in the British ship. The admiral's sailors retaliated, but the pirate ship was much smaller and moving fast, making it a harder target.

The few times the pirates were hit, the entire ship rattled and swayed in the water. But the damage the navy was inflicting was nothing compared to the mark the pirates were leaving. The sailors looked to the admiral for guidance, but he seldom gave them orders. It was almost like he *wanted* to lose.

Cannonballs and chunks of wood flew through the air. Parts of the navy ship were set ablaze and the sky filled with smoke. Conner had written the entire battle, but writing it was nothing like living it. Even though he knew exactly what was going to happen, it was still terrifying to see it come to life.

"This is the most dangerous flirting I've ever seen!" Alex said.

"Don't worry, the pirates win!" Conner said, then looked up at the captain. "Sally, would you hurry up and tell your pirates to aim for the navy's cannons already? I don't want to get splinters in my eyes!"

The thought had come into the captain's head just a moment before Conner suggested it. "How did you know I was—"

"JUST DO IT!" he yelled.

"Aim for their cannons, girls!" Auburn Sally ordered.

The pirates followed their captain's orders and aimed their cannons at the navy's. They blasted them off the ship, leaving the *Royal Tantrum* virtually defenseless. The pirates cheered and shook their swords at the sailors.

Winking Wendy jerked the wheel, and the *Dolly Llama* slammed into the *Royal Tantrum*, bringing the pirate ship alongside it.

"Now let's take their ship!" Auburn Sally ordered.

The pirates each grabbed a rope and swung aboard the navy ship. The battle continued with hand-to-hand combat on the decks of the *Royal Tantrum*. The sailors were barely trained for sailing and were no match for the pirates attacking them.

Winking Wendy flashed her empty eye socket at the sailors, scaring them and causing them to trip over themselves. Stinky-Feet Phoebe held her bare feet against their noses, and the fumes made the men temporarily lose consciousness. Having no legs made it easy for Somersault Sydney to

tumble into the sailors and knock them down like bowling pins. Pancake-Face Patty seemed to enjoy head-butting the men, which explained the odd shape of her skull. Big-Booty Bertha simply turned her backside to any of the sailors charging toward her, and they bounced backward onto the deck.

Some of the pirates weren't as efficient fighters. Siren Sue sang high notes to hurt the sailors' ears. Fish-Lips Lucy irritated them with slobbery kisses. Too-Much-Rum Ronda drunkenly argued with the sailors about religion and politics. Not-So-Jolly Joan simply cried on their shoulders. These pirates offered perfect distractions for Peg-Leg Peggy (or "Margret") to sneak up behind the sailors and trip them with her wooden leg.

On the upper deck, Captain Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson walked around each other with their swords raised. They were so lost in each other's eyes that they almost forgot they had to fight to keep up appearances. When the two eventually started dueling, it resembled more of a passionate tango than an actual sword fight.

"This is the most nonviolent violence I've ever witnessed," Alex said.

"I kept it tame in case I had young readers," Conner said.

"That explains why the antagonists are so simple," she noted. "To be honest, I was really worried about what kind of villains your imagination would have come up with. I'm glad they're just men in tights."

"The navy sailors aren't the bad guys in this story," he said. "The bad guys are *way* scarier. They're based on people I've seen in nightmares. But we'll be long gone before they show up… *I hope*."

Eventually, the sailors surrendered and the pirates rounded them up in the center of the *Royal Tantrum*'s lower deck. Auburn Sally pushed Admiral Jacobson off the upper deck, and his men caught him. The pirates raised their weapons in celebration—they had won the battle!

"You've lost, Admiral," Auburn Sally said. "The British Navy is going to be so disappointed."

"Sometimes a man fails in order to win," the admiral said with a smirk.

The navy sailors were stripped of their weapons, and their hands were tied behind their backs. The pirates placed a plank between ships and forced the sailors to cross it and board the *Dolly Llama*. Once everyone aboard the *Royal Tantrum* had been taken prisoner, the pirates blasted the navy ship with cannonballs until it sank.

"Put the prisoners in the cells belowdecks," Auburn Sally ordered, and

glanced at the twins. “And I mean *all* the prisoners.”

The pirates untied the twins and pushed them along with the sailors.

“Oh no,” Conner said. “The bad guys are going to show up soon! I’ve got to convince Auburn Sally I’m the author of this story before they get here!”

“I’m willing to help you if it speeds things up,” Alex said with a sigh.

“Well, I’m not willing to accept your help yet,” he said. “I told you I can take care of this on my own!”

Conner managed to push past the pirates manhandling him and his sister. He dashed across the deck, but just before he was in reach of Auburn Sally, he was tripped by Somersault Sydney and tackled by Catfish Kate and High-Tide Tabitha.

“Captain, don’t lock us up!” he pleaded from underneath the pirates. “I’m warning you! Something really bad is about to happen, but you can avoid it if you just listen to me!”

Auburn Sally laughed at his warning. “Take him away,” she said, and turned her back on him.

The pirates forced Conner to his feet and dragged him away, but he wasn’t ready to give up.

“I know what you stole from SMOKY-SAILS SAM!” Conner yelled.

The entire ship suddenly froze as if he’d shouted something obscene. Alex could tell that all the pirates and sailors knew who her brother was talking about. Just the mention of the name Smoky-Sails Sam sent a collective chill down their spines.

Auburn Sally turned back to Conner with large, fearful eyes. He continued his warning, desperate for her to listen to him.

“He knows what you stole from him, too—he knows about everything that happened on the island!” Conner said. “Smoky-Sails Sam is looking for you and your crew right now! He’s going to see the smoke from this battle and be here before sunrise tomorrow!”

Conner knew that if anything would get through to her this would be it. The captain looked him up and down but didn’t say a word.

“Your orders, Captain?” Catfish Kate asked.

Auburn Sally put on a brave face for her crew. “Throw this boy and his sister in the cells with the others,” she said. “If he has tall tales to tell, he can share them with the other prisoners.”

Auburn Sally turned around and faced the ocean. Conner struggled against the pirates, but it was no use. They were too strong to break free from—that's how he had written them. Conner and Alex were pushed down the steps to the cells belowdecks with the sailors.

"Well, that *totally* worked," Alex said. "Are you sure you don't want my help?"

"Give it a minute," Conner said. "She'll come around—she'll have to."

The captain looked down at the burning wreckage of the *Royal Tantrum*, and her eyes followed the trails of smoke ascending into the sky. Once all the sailors and the twins were belowdecks and there were no pirates around to bear witness, she pulled out a necklace she kept hidden in her shirt. Dangling from a golden chain was a bloodred ruby the size of a human heart.

While she refused to believe everything Conner had said, she couldn't deny that he possessed extraordinary knowledge of her ship and crew. If what he said about Smoky-Sails Sam was even remotely accurate, then the captain's greatest nightmare was about to come true.

Chapter Eight

THE WRATH OF SMOKY-SAILS SAM

Things were calm belowdecks on the *Dolly Llama*. Alex and Conner shared a small cell, while Admiral Jacobson and his men occupied four larger ones. Everyone was silent, not from the embarrassment of defeat, but from the sheer exhaustion of the battle. In all fairness, the sailors didn't seem disappointed by their loss and sat rather comfortably in the cells. Many were stretched out and gently rocked to sleep by the sway of the ship.

"Don't worry, men," Admiral Jacobson said as he paced around his cell. "We will find a way off this vessel and bring the pirates to justice! Those criminals may imprison us now, but soon we shall escape and make the British Navy proud!"

The sailors looked around the cells to see whom the Admiral was talking to, because none of them were too worried or eager to change the situation. After months of strenuous labor operating the *Royal Tantrum*, imprisonment was a nice change of pace for them.

"Save it, Admiral," Conner said. "The whole crew knows you've got the hots for Auburn Sally. No one is expecting to escape anytime soon."

The admiral was outraged by his insinuation. "How dare you suggest I *welcomed* the sinking of my ship or *allowed* pirates to capture my men!" he said. "I would never betray Britain with affection for a scoundrel like Captain Auburn Sally!"

Conner sighed and shook his head. "Raise your hand if you knew this was going to happen," he said. "Come on, don't be shy."

He raised his hand and Alex quickly followed. One by one, the sailors raised their hands, too, and the admiral was faced with a rude awakening.

Despite his efforts to shield it, the heart on his sleeve was just as visible as the badges of honor on his coat.

"You mean, you've all known the entire time?" he asked.

The sailors nodded in unison with the twins.

"To be honest, Admiral," said the first mate, "I don't think any of us knew you were trying to *hide it*. We don't hold it against you, though. The whole reason we joined the navy in the first place was to have an adventure, and there's never been a dull moment chasing these dames around the sea."

The admiral wanted to argue further, but the jig was clearly up. Instead of clearing his reputation, he just shrugged and had a seat on the floor.

"Well, I suppose that's a relief, then," Jacobson said.

The admiral lost all desire to form an escape plan. He put his feet up on the metal bars and enjoyed the quiet and calm of the cells with the rest of his crew. Conner, on the other hand, was growing more agitated by the second. His mission to locate and recruit his characters was going to be much more difficult now that he had refused his sister's help.

"So what happens next in this story?" Alex asked with a yawn.

"Auburn Sally is going to invite Admiral Jacobson to dinner in her chambers," Conner said. "They'll admit their affection for each other and then Jacobson will convince his sailors to join Auburn Sally's crew of pirates."

"Nice," Alex said. "And you still think 'Starboardia' isn't a love story?"

Conner grunted. "Okay, fine—*it's a love story*," he said. "You've identified your brother as a big sap. Are you happy now?"

Alex laughed. "I don't know why it's so hard for you to admit it," she said. "Plenty of men write romances."

"I never meant to write a romance," Conner said. "I just thought Jack and Goldilocks had a really cool story. Everyone wants to be a hero, but Jack gave it up to be with the person he loved. He didn't care what people thought of him—Goldilocks was more important to him than his reputation. It takes courage to face a giant, but it takes a true hero to stand up to the world. I guess I wanted to celebrate that by putting it into my own story."

A smile grew on Alex's face as she listened to her brother. He kept his feelings hidden behind an emotional brick wall, but every so often she managed to knock a hole through it and peek inside.

"You're not a sap, but you're definitely a *hopeless romantic*," she said.

“I think Mrs. Peters was right. You’re going to learn a lot about yourself traveling through these stories.”

Conner didn’t want to agree with her, but he knew she was right. “Oh brother,” he said. “Next thing you know, I’ll be collecting porcelain dolls and listening to polka music.”

The doors opened and Winking Wendy and Somersault Sydney walked in. They rattled the cell bars with their weapons to disturb their captives, but the tranquil sailors didn’t even look up. The pirates unlocked the admiral’s cell and pulled him out by the ponytail.

“Ouch!” Jacobson shouted. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“The captain wants you to join her for dinner,” Winking Wendy said.

The sailors hooted and whistled, making the admiral blush. Winking Wendy flashed them her empty eye socket and they quickly quieted down. The pirates unlocked the door of the twins’ cell next.

“What’s going on?” Conner asked.

“Captain wants you two to join her as well,” Somersault Sydney said.

Conner wasn’t expecting this. Up to this moment, every beat of the story had followed his writing without a hitch. He hoped it meant his warning about Smoky-Sails Sam had caught the captain’s attention.

The pirates escorted the twins and the admiral through the *Dolly Llama* to the upper deck. They opened a pair of double doors and pushed the twins and the admiral into the captain’s quarters.

Auburn Sally’s private chambers were the most elegant part of the ship. The walls were covered in red wallpaper and gold crown molding. A crystal chandelier hung over a long wooden table set for four. The captain looked like she was deep in thought when they arrived. She sat in the back of her chambers at a desk with several maps of the Caribbean spread across it. She was sitting with one foot up and spun a dagger on the desk like a dreidel. Her hat and coat were hung on a rack beside the desk, exposing her full head of long wavy hair.

“Your guests, Captain,” Winking Wendy said as she presented the twins and the admiral.

“Thank you,” Auburn Sally said. “You may leave us.”

Winking Wendy and Somersault Sydney left the chambers, shutting the double doors behind them. Conner had written the next part of the story as a romantic dinner between the captain and the admiral, but obviously things

had changed. As soon as they entered, Auburn Sally fixated on him with an inquisitive, unwavering stare.

"Since you seem to know *everything*, I imagine there's no point in pretending the admiral and I are adversaries," she said.

"Nope," Conner said. "You guys are in a complicated long-distance relationship."

"Just for the record," Alex chimed in, "I think it's *very* romantic."

Conner gave his sister a dirty look—she was *never* going to let it go. The admiral glanced between the twins and the captain, waiting for someone to fill him in.

"Will someone explain how this lad knows so much about us?" he asked.

"According to him, we're just characters in a story he's written," Auburn Sally said with amusement. "He believes everything in this world is just a figment of his imagination."

Conner didn't appreciate the disdainful tone in her voice. The admiral looked at him just like everyone else had after hearing the pronouncement.

"Have I done or said anything to *contradict* it?" Conner asked. "Because I'm pretty sure I've been right about *everything* so far."

Auburn Sally glared at him and a challenging look came to her face.

"I have something hidden underneath my shirt," the captain said. "There are only four people alive who know it exists. Two are in this room, and one is the Queen of England. Guess correctly, and I *might* take you more seriously."

Conner knew exactly what she was referring to and didn't waste a minute to prove it. "You're wearing a necklace called the Heart of the Caribbean," he said. "It's the most prized piece of jewelry in the Western Hemisphere. It was given to Governor Connelly by Queen Anne as a token of her appreciation for governing the small island of Saint Ballena."

The intensity in Auburn Sally's face dissolved and her mouth fell open. She and the admiral were completely dumbfounded. The captain pulled on a gold chain around her neck and lifted a large ruby necklace out of her blouse. The ruby was brighter than the crown molding and the chandelier put together.

Conner pointed at the jewel. "*That's* what you stole from Smoky-Sails Sam," he said. "And you're wrong, by the way. There are *five* people alive

who know it exists, seven including my sister and me. A pirate named Killy Billy saw you steal it. He's the one who told Smoky-Sails Sam you have it, and now Sam is on his way to take it back."

Alex was usually really good about filling in the blanks, but the lack of detail was getting frustrating.

"Would you mind sharing with the rest of the class who Smoky-Sails Sam is?" she asked.

Conner hesitated. He knew the story like the back of his hand; it just wasn't a pleasant one to share.

"Smoky-Sails Sam is the most feared pirate in the Caribbean," he explained. "He's so powerful, the British Navy refuses to go anywhere near him. He has a fleet of five ships and hundreds of pirates. His ships burn rows of torches above their sails, leaving trails of smoke through the sky, so the whole Caribbean knows where they've been and where they're headed. They obliterate any ship they encounter, whether it's a threat or not."

Alex gulped. This was exactly the kind of villain she was afraid her brother would create.

"He sounds *charming*," Alex said. "How did he become so powerful?"

"Smoky-Sails Sam used to be a slave," Conner said. "He was captured from an African village by slave traders and brought to the Caribbean on a slave ship. However, on the way over, he broke the chains that bound him and led the other slaves in a mutiny. They killed the slave traders and took over the ship. Sam became the new captain, the liberated slaves became his crew, and he renamed the ship the *Vengeance*.

"Unfortunately, the power went to Sam's head. His crew wanted to go home, but Sam wanted to continue on and seek more revenge. He sailed the *Vengeance* to the small island of Saint Ballena and ordered his men to raid it. Governor Connelly sent word to the British Navy that they were under attack, but since the island was so small and valueless, the navy abandoned them. The governor and all the men on Saint Ballena were killed and their families were forced to work as servants.

"Since there was no government or authority on Saint Ballena, criminals from all over the Caribbean sailed there and joined Sam. Soon, he had enough men to form a fleet of pirate ships. They terrorized all the colonies nearby, growing stronger and stronger after every target they hit. The liberated slaves from the *Vengeance* wanted nothing to do with it, so they

stole a ship from Sam's fleet and headed back to Africa. Sam was so outraged, he sailed after them and sank their ship. The smoky debris from the destruction is how Sam became known as Smoky-Sails Sam, and the whole Caribbean learned of his ruthlessness.

"As time went on, Smoky-Sails Sam had a daughter named Sumire. Governor Connelly's only child, a girl named Christine, was forced to work as her maid. The young women became very close and loved each other like sisters. Sumire helped Christine plan an escape from Saint Ballena. The Heart of the Caribbean was the only object of Governor Connelly's that Smoky-Sails Sam did not destroy, so Christine stole it back before she left. It didn't take long before Smoky-Sails Sam realized it was missing. To save her friend, Sumire took the blame. Rather than showing his only child any mercy, Smoky-Sails Sam made a gruesome example out of her. He cut her throat in front of his entire fleet, further proving his brutality, and no one ever stole from him again.

"Christine escaped from the island and sold the Heart of the Caribbean to a jewel merchant, but then stole it back the following day. The money she had acquired in the sale was enough to buy her own ship and hire a crew. She named the ship the *Dolly Llama*, and became known throughout the Caribbean as—"

"Auburn Sally!" Alex said, finishing her brother's sentence.

"Correct," Conner said. "When Jacobson became an admiral, his first assignment was to capture the sailing thief Auburn Sally. It was love at first sight, and they've been chasing each other around the Caribbean ever since. What the captain doesn't know is that Killy Billy told Smoky-Sails Sam that he saw her steal the Heart of the Caribbean. Sam's been following the *Dolly Llama* through the sea, too, and is getting closer by the minute. Since Sally's the only person who's stolen something from him and lived to see another day, he wants to make another gruesome example out of her."

"Conner, that backstory is so dark! Why would you write something so dreadful?" Alex asked.

"I told you, it was based on a nightmare I had," he said. "Besides, it's not like real pirates were any better."

Conner turned to Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson with desperation in his eyes. *"Now do you believe I created you?"* he asked.

The captain and the admiral were both astonished by Conner's

familiarity with their lives. Whoever he was, wherever he came from, they could no longer deny there was something unique and eerie about him.

"I believe you put pen to paper about all of this, but I'm still not convinced you *created* this world or the people in it," Auburn Sally said.

Conner had rolled his eyes so many times, his sockets were getting sore. "So you think I *plagiarized* it?" he asked.

"Explorers are quick to claim the places they find, but they don't *create* the land they raise flags on," Auburn Sally said. "Perhaps all writers are nothing more than subconscious explorers, sailing across a sea of other worlds, and you're just the first to discover ours."

Alex was intrigued by the captain's theory. She wondered if every fictional story she had ever read was more of an author's *discovery* than his or her *idea.* Perhaps *imagination* was a *subconscious map* to uncharted worlds of the cosmos. It certainly would explain why her grandmother's Portal Potion was so effective—it didn't *create* the world the text described, but simply provided a doorway into a world that had always been there.

Conner was getting a headache trying to understand it himself. "That sounds really deep and complex, but you're missing the point!" he said. "I'm trying to tell you that Smoky-Sails Sam's fleet is headed here right now! He's planning to kill all of you and take back the Heart of the Caribbean! But if you listen to us, we can help you avoid him!"

"How?" Admiral Jacobson asked.

"By helping my sister and me," Conner explained. "I'm about to make you an offer—it's going to be hard to grasp, so we might want to sit for this."

Auburn Sally, the admiral, and the twins took seats around the long table.

"Do you want me to explain this part?" Alex asked.

"I told you, I got this," Conner said, and cleared his throat. "You know that subconscious sea of other worlds you were just talking about? Well, for all intents and purposes, it exists! There's another world that's in big trouble—one I didn't write about. All our friends live there and a horrible army has invaded it. My sister and I are recruiting people from a bunch of different worlds to help us fight the army. If you come with us and help us defeat them, we'll bring you right back here."

Conner grinned like he was being more than generous. The captain and

the admiral exchanged a puzzled look—something didn't add up.

"That's not an offer," Auburn Sally said. "An offer is an *exchange*. Taking us away from our problems, making us fight for you, then bringing us right back to our problems isn't an exchange—it's just more work for us."

"She's got a point," Alex said.

"Okay," Conner said, and quickly thought about something appealing to offer. "Well, if you help us, I'll tell you how you defeat Smoky-Sails Sam."

The captain and the admiral nodded as they considered it. Jacobson whispered something into Auburn Sally's ear, like an attorney speaking with his client.

"So you're telling us we *defeat* Smoky-Sails Sam?" the captain asked. "*Regardless* of whether we help you or not?"

"Duh!" Conner said with a snort. "That's the whole point of this story."

Alex slapped a hand against her forehead. Her brother was oblivious to what Auburn Sally was implying. She appointed herself as *his* attorney and pulled him aside to whisper in his ear.

"Conner, you basically just told them they don't need to help you," she whispered. *"You need to make them an offer they can't refuse."*

"Oh, dang it!" he said. *"I should never have written them to be so cunning. Thanks for the heads-up."*

The twins turned back to the captain and the admiral. Conner let out a low, slow, and menacing chuckle.

"Silly, silly Sally," he said. "What you don't know is that the road to victory is long and tedious. There are dozens of battles, hundreds of casualties, and thousands of miles awaiting you. It takes *years* to learn what I could tell you in a matter of seconds. If you help us, I will give you the *shortcut* to your triumph, and save you a ton of hassle. You'd be sparing your ship from a lot of damage and even saving the lives of a few of your crew."

Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson whispered between themselves again. They both knew they would have to face Smoky-Sails Sam eventually; there was no way of getting around it. If Conner could supply them with information on how to do it efficiently, they would have to consider his offer seriously.

They turned to the twins and presented a counteroffer.

“We’ll help you if you help us defeat Smoky-Sails Sam *first*,” Auburn Sally said.

Conner was about to rip his hair out. He silently vowed never to write another smart character into one of his stories ever again.

“Deal,” he said through a clenched jaw.

Conner and Auburn Sally shook hands over the table. Alex wasn’t convinced the captain and the admiral were being truthful and pulled her brother aside one final time.

“How do you know they’re being honest?” she whispered.

“Because I wrote them to be just as trustworthy as they are calculating,” he said. *“And I’ll remind them about that shipwreck in the sequel!”*

“Let’s discuss the details of our victory over dinner,” Auburn Sally said. “I’m famished. Negotiating always gives me an appetite.”

It had been hours since their last meal, so the twins were glad to hear it. The captain rang a bell and a few moments later, Fish-Lips Lucy entered the chambers pushing a cart with several covered serving trays. The quarters filled with a delectable aroma and the twins began salivating and their stomachs growled.

“Conner, what did you write for dinner?” Alex asked.

“Tomato soup, mashed potatoes, and rosary chicken,” Conner said, and licked his lips.

“Rosary chicken?” she asked. “Did you mean *rotisserie chicken*?”

“Oh no,” he said fearfully.

Fish-Lips Lucy uncovered the largest serving tray, and rather than a delicious roasted chicken, she revealed a live chicken wearing a Catholic rosary. The chicken panicked and fluttered amok around the chambers, squawking loudly and shedding feathers wherever she went.

Auburn Sally gave Fish-Lips Lucy a dirty look. “The chicken seems a little *undercooked*,” she said.

“Sorry, Captain,” Fish-Lips Lucy said. “I knew I was forgetting something.”

Suddenly, Siren Sue burst into the chambers, causing everyone to jump and forget all about the chicken. Her eyes were large and she was out of breath, like she had come in a hurry.

“Forgive my intrusion, Captain!” Siren Sue huffed. “I saw smoke rising on the horizon behind the ship! I inspected it and saw a fleet of ships

coming this way! Smoky-Sails Sam is following us!"

The captain, the admiral, and the twins stood up so fast, they knocked silverware and plates off the table. Auburn Sally darted to the large windows in the back of her chambers and looked through a telescope beside her desk.

"It's Smoky-Sails Sam, all right," the captain said, and then jerked her head toward Conner. "I thought you said we had until morning."

He racked his brain trying to figure out why they were so early. "It's because I rushed the battle!" he said. "There was smoke in the sky earlier than there should have been! You and the admiral were supposed to exchange a lot more witty banter before the first cannon fired! I accidentally gave Smoky-Sails Sam a head start!"

Auburn Sally put on her hat and coat and immediately went into damage-control mode. "Lucy and Sue, tell the women to drop the sails at once," she ordered. "I want every candle and lantern on this ship extinguished—we'll be harder to follow in darkness. Also, free the sailors from the cells. If they want to survive the night, they'll need to join our crew."

The pirates nodded and ran out of the chambers to inform the others. Auburn Sally hurried out on deck and the twins and Jacobson followed. She wrapped her hands around the *Dolly Llama*'s wheel and looked to Conner.

"Well?" she asked. "What do we need to do to defeat Smoky-Sails Sam?"

"It's not a *what*, it's a *where*," he said. "We need to head *west* immediately, sail through the Parakeet Islands, and pass the Isle of Skulls."

The captain didn't waste a moment asking questions. She spun the wheel so hard to her right, it almost broke off.

"Conner, where are you taking us?" Alex asked.

"Starboardia," he said.

Chapter Nine

SAILING CIRCLES AROUND THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE

The pirates scurried across the decks of the *Dolly Llama* like panicked ants. They blew out all the torches, lanterns, and candles until the ship sailed in total darkness. With the moon as their only source of light, they lowered the sails and took full advantage of the night breeze. The sailors were released from the cells belowdecks and put to work loading and positioning the cannons. All it took was the mention of Smoky-Sails Sam's name and the sailors didn't hesitate in joining the *Dolly Llama*'s crew.

Admiral Jacobson stood at the front of the ship with one leg on the bowsprit. He scanned the sea ahead to make sure there was nothing the ship might collide with in the darkness.

"It looks clear," he called up to the captain. "I'll let you know if that changes."

Auburn Sally kept a firm grip on her ship's wheel and a close eye on the approaching fleet of pirates behind them. With every minute, Smoky-Sails Sam was getting closer and closer to the *Dolly Llama.* The captain prayed Conner's shortcut would work and they could finally defeat Sam and his crew.

"You said to sail west to the Parakeet Islands, pass the Isle of Skulls, and then what do we do?" she asked.

"Then we'll sail to the right in a circle for an entire day," he said. "The legend states, if you travel *starboard* for a day in the Bermuda Triangle, it'll take you to Starboardia—hence the name."

"Yes, I know the *legend*," Auburn Sally said. "Every pirate has heard of the myth. Are you sure it's real?"

Conner was getting tired of repeating himself. “Yes, I’m positive,” he said. “It’s how you guys find it in the end of the story. I’m sure it’ll work now, too.”

“So, Starboardia is an actual location?” Alex asked.

“Why else would I name this story ‘Starboardia’?” her brother said.

Alex shrugged. “I thought it was just a cute name based on pirate lingo,” she said. “Is there also a Portworld or Portopia or Portland?”

Conner froze and thought about it for a moment. “No, but that would be a great name for a sequel!” he said. “Hmm… I should write that down.”

“Let’s stay focused on the original,” Alex said. “Is Starboardia a country?”

“Starboardia is an ancient island,” Auburn Sally said. “It’s believed to be the only surviving land from the Lost City of Atlantis. It’s nearly impossible to find because it floats around the Bermuda Triangle like a large ship, and never passes through the same part of the sea twice. They say the debris from all shipwrecks in the Caribbean eventually washes ashore on the island’s coast.”

“Nice backstory, Conner,” Alex said. “How will Starboardia help us defeat Smoky-Sails Sam?”

“Hundreds of years ago, when the Europeans first settled in the Americas, an indigenous tribe was forced off their island by the white men who settled there,” Auburn Sally said. “The tribe was outnumbered ten to one, so they had no choice but to vacate and hope they would find another island somewhere else in the Caribbean. They set sail and were caught in the middle of a horrible hurricane. When the storm finally cleared, they saw Starboardia in the distance. The tribe used all the wreckage on the island to build a magnificent fortress. The structure was carefully designed to help the tribe defeat an enemy that outnumbered them ten to one, should they ever be invaded again.”

“Oh, I get it now,” Alex said. “We’re going to use the fortress! How fun!”

“Exactly,” Conner said. “Including Sally’s pirates and Jacobson’s sailors, we have about fifty people on this ship. Smoky-Sails Sam has five ships and about a hundred pirates on each. The fortress should do the trick.”

Suddenly, the twins and the captain were startled by loud eruptions coming from above. Everyone aboard the *Dolly Llama* looked up and saw

red fireworks exploding in the sky. With each bright burst, the ocean and the ship were briefly illuminated by red light.

"Where are those coming from?" Conner asked.

They turned to the fleet of pirate ships in the distance and saw another set of fireworks being launched from their decks.

"Smoky-Sails Sam," Auburn Sally said as the fireworks exploded overhead. "They're using them to see us in the dark! Clever scum!"

Since all the light on board the *Dolly Llama* had been extinguished, the approaching fleet had lost track of them, and were headed in a slightly different direction. But now with the fireworks illuminating the ship, the fleet repositioned itself and was once again headed straight for the *Dolly Llama*.

"What do we do now?" Conner asked.

"Pray the wind is stronger with us than it is with them," the captain said. "Otherwise, we might not make it to Starboardia."

Conner paced the deck trying to think of a way to put distance between their ship and the fleet. At this point, Alex didn't care how much her brother opposed her help; she wasn't going to let his pride jeopardize their mission. When he was facing the other way, Alex covertly pointed at the sky. Almost instantaneously, thick clouds blew in and covered the stars. The atmosphere became too humid for the fireworks to go off.

Now that the fireworks were taken care of, the *Dolly Llama* needed a boost so the fleet wouldn't catch up. Alex took a deep breath and blew air toward the sails. A strong breeze came out of nowhere and pushed the ship a little faster, causing everyone on board to jolt.

"Captain, it's a miracle!" Siren Sue shouted from the crow's nest. "Clouds are blocking the fireworks and the wind is making us sail faster!"

The pirates and the sailors cheered in celebration. Auburn Sally stared at the sky in awe. Conner was surprised at how quickly the weather had changed in their favor—it was a little *too* convenient.

"Alex, cut it out!" Conner said. "I told you no magic!"

His sister shrugged innocently. "It wasn't me," she said. "Must be some kind of tropical storm."

"Nice try," Conner said. "But tropical storms don't blow clouds in one direction and ships in the other!"

Auburn Sally eyed the sky again and noticed the strange phenomenon he

was referring to. “What’s going on?” she asked. “*Your sister* is causing this?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I forgot to mention she has magic powers—but don’t encourage her! This is *my* story and *my* project. I can get us to Starboardia and help you defeat Smoky-Sails Sam on my own.”

Conner stomped off the upper deck and joined Admiral Jacobson at the front of the ship. Auburn Sally’s imagination had been broadened so much by the twins, *this* wasn’t hard to grasp. She sauntered over to Alex and casually leaned on the railing.

“*Men*,” she said with a sigh. “They always want to feel like they’re in control.”

“It’s my own fault,” Alex said. “He asked for my help earlier and I kind of embarrassed him about it. Now he thinks he has to prove himself to me.”

“Rule number one on my ship: No woman is allowed to take orders from a man,” Auburn Sally said.

“That’s a philosophy I could get behind,” Alex said.

“Then as your captain, I order you to leave Smoky-Sails Sam’s fleet a few *presents* behind us,” the captain said. “If you get my drift.”

Alex and Auburn Sally shared a smile—Alex knew exactly what she meant. She turned toward the fleet in the distance and pointed at the water. Several clusters of sharp rocks stuck out of the ocean behind the ship.

“Attagirl,” the captain said.

The obstructions and the wind helped the *Dolly Llama* gain distance from Smoky-Sails Sam’s fleet. Soon the pirate ships had shrunk so much in the distance behind them, they could barely see the trails of smoke emitting from their sails.

The *Dolly Llama* sailed through the night, and by sunrise the Parakeet Islands appeared on the horizon ahead. Unfortunately, the rising sun gave the fleet of pirate ships a better view of the ocean, and the *Dolly Llama* was spotted again.

The ship entered a narrow channel between the Parakeet Islands, and the crew learned why Conner had named them so. The islands were covered with thousands and thousands of colorful birds. It was a beautiful sight, but the farther the ship sailed through the channel, the louder the birds’ squawking became. As if they were competing for the pirates’ attention, each bird tried to out sing the next. When the *Dolly Llama* reached the

center of the channel, the sound became deafening. The whole ship covered their ears and moaned.

"PUT A SOCK IN IT!" Conner yelled at the birds.

"PUT A SOCK IN IT! PUT A SOCK IN IT!" the parakeets mimicked. "PUT A SOCK IN IT! PUT A SOCK IN IT!"

Alex couldn't stand the noise any longer. She snapped her fingers and birdseed rained on the islands. All the parakeets swooped down from the trees to feed and went silent. Conner shot his sister a look—but one of gratitude.

"Okay, I suppose *some* magic won't hurt," he said. "But nothing crazy—the *Dolly Llama*'s crew has to feel accomplished, too."

A twinkle came into Admiral Jacobson's eye as he watched the birds eat the seeds. "You know, the *red worm* is known to *cleanse* a parakeet's stomach," he said. "Perhaps we could leave a *nasty storm* behind for Sam's fleet?"

The twins made eye contact and mischievous smiles grew across their faces.

"Oh, Conner," Alex said, and clasped her hands together. "Please, please, please let me leave red worms behind!"

"Yeah—you've got to," he said. "It's just too good."

Alex jumped up and down giddily and snapped her fingers again. Small red worms rained down on the islands, too, and the parakeets happily dug in. The admiral and the twins laughed as they imagined the mess the birds would leave on the fleet later that day.

A few hours after exiting the channel, the *Dolly Llama* sailed past the Isle of Skulls. It was a creepy island with a permanent layer of fog hanging in the air. The shore had no beaches and was lined with dark eerie caves. The land was littered with large rocks that had been chiseled to look like large human skulls. Alex could have sworn the heads were following her as the ship passed them.

"Hey, Conner, watch this," Alex said. She cleared her throat and all the skulls started singing an obnoxious song by a boy band the twins knew from the radio.

"Oh baaaaby, please don't play this game,

My heart is so full of shame,
My love cannot be tamed,
I'm a moth and you're the flame,
And even though it's lame,
Remind me of your naaaaame!"

The twins were laughing so hard, their stomachs hurt. The rest of the ship screamed and pointed at the possessed skulls.

"It's the devil's music!" Winking Wendy shouted.

The pirates waved crucifixes at the island and shot the rocks with their rifles. Alex figured the joke had gone far enough. She cleared her throat again and the skulls returned to normal.

Once the Isle of Skulls was far behind the *Dolly Llama*, Conner excitedly ran from the front of the ship to Auburn Sally's side on the upper deck.

"All right, we've passed the Isle of Skulls!" he said. "Time to travel starboard."

"And if we sail in circles to the right all night, we'll find Starboardia?" Auburn Sally asked.

"More like Starboardia will find us," Conner said.

The captain stepped to the side of the wheel and presented it to him. "Would you like to do the honors, *Commander Bailey*?" she asked.

"Oh gosh," he said. "Sure!"

Conner had never even driven a car, so he wasn't going to turn down the opportunity to steer a pirate ship. He put his hands on the wheel and could have sworn he felt the ship's heartbeat pulsing through it. It was an exhilarating sensation—with just the slightest movement, he had the power to change the ship's course and the crew's destiny. It reminded him of the feeling he had when he wrote, but it was ten times stronger. He was *living* and *breathing* the adventure he had only dreamed about.

Naturally, being chased by a fleet of dangerous pirates took some fun out of steering the ship, but it was thrilling nonetheless. Since they arrived, he had been angry, frustrated, anxious, and scared by different things, but the excitement of being in the world he created never left him. He wished every author got to feel what he was feeling right now.

As the sun started setting, it illuminated the ocean waves around the *Dolly Llama* like golden zebra stripes. Conner turned the wheel as far to the right as it would go and tied it down.

"Starboardia, here we come!" he said.

That night, all the pirates and sailors gathered in Auburn Sally's chambers so Conner could tell them what to expect the next day. It was strange to prepare them for a place he technically had never been before. He could only rely on the images in his head and hope they matched. The Rosary Chicken got cozy on Alex's lap and she stroked her feathers while she listened to her brother.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and chicken," Conner said. "Welcome to Starboardia 101. I'm assuming by now, whether through eavesdropping or word of mouth, everyone knows why we're headed to Starboardia."

Not-So-Jolly Joan and Too-Much-Rum Ronda raised their hands.

"No one ever tells me anything," Not-So-Jolly Joan said, and burst into tears.

"I was told, but I don't remember," Too-Much-Rum Ronda said, and hiccupped so hard, she fell off her seat.

"No worries, I'll explain," Conner said. "We are outnumbered ten to one by Smoky-Sails Sam's fleet. There is a fortress on Starboardia that was designed for a group in our exact predicament. The fortress is filled with hundreds of booby traps; there are trapdoors, human slingshots, swinging blades, endless mazes, and much more. Once the fortress is activated, the traps will go off every thirty seconds.

"Unless you want to be crushed, cut in half, or fall to your death—listen to this part very carefully. There are safe zones throughout the fortress painted in red. Five seconds before the traps are set off, you will hear a bell—when you hear the bell, find one of those safe zones immediately! I've come up with a motto to help those of us who have difficulty remembering directions. Repeat after me: *In Red, Ain't Dead*."

"In Red, Ain't Dead," the pirates and sailors repeated.

"Very good," Conner said. "Now, once we're on the island and find the fortress, we have to wait until all of Smoky-Sails Sam's men are inside before we can activate it. The fortress sort of works like a clock—a very heavy net of boulders pulls on gears located at the top, which turn and operate all the booby traps. The net is held up by twenty-one ropes and

needs all twenty-one ropes to support it. Once one of these ropes is cut, another rope will snap under pressure every thirty seconds, causing the net of boulders to drop a little lower, which pulls on the gears, and activates the booby traps. Does this all make sense?"

The pirates and sailors stared at Conner like he was speaking another language. Even Alex was having a hard time following along.

"Those are just the logistics in case anyone was wondering," Conner said. "There's only one thing you have to remember—*which is*?"

"In Red, Ain't Dead!" the pirates and sailors said in unison. They were very proud of themselves and looked like dogs expecting treats.

"Great," Conner said. "Everybody break a leg tomorrow! Oh—no offense, Somersault Sydney!"

"None taken," the legless pirate said.

As the *Dolly Llama* sailed in large starboard loops around the Bermuda Triangle, the pirates, sailors, and the twins went to bed to rest up for the following day. In the sleeping quarters belowdecks, rows of white hammocks were stacked from floor to ceiling. It was chilly down there, so Alex and Conner were thankful their mother had packed sweatshirts for them.

The hammocks swung with the sway of the ship and were very relaxing. Soon the pirates and the sailors fell asleep. Their snoring was so loud, the twins were worried the sides of the ship would burst open. Alex glanced down at the hammock below hers to see if Conner was still awake.

"Oh good, you're still up, too," she said.

"I don't think the dead could sleep through this," he said.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" she asked.

"A little bit," he said with a long sigh. "I just hope it all works out so the trip here hasn't been for nothing."

Alex could sense the doubt in his voice and she felt a little guilty. Had she been more supportive and encouraging in the beginning, he probably wouldn't be so cynical.

"Everything is going to be fine," Alex said. "You're a really great author, Conner. I keep forgetting to tell you how impressed I am by all of this. Every beat of your story is so well thought out and entertaining. The more it unfolds, the more intrigued I become. I can't wait for you to write your first book—there are millions of little Alexes and Conners around the

world who are going to love it."

Conner was touched by his sister's words. It meant a lot coming from her, since he was convinced she had read every book in the world.

"Thanks, Alex," he said. "I would never have met Jack and Goldilocks if it weren't for you—so thanks for supplying all the inspiration."

"But think of everything you came up with all on your own," she said. "You would have done just fine without me. I wish I had your imagination. What's your secret to making a story so good? Do you have any writing tricks or rituals?"

Conner had never thought about it before. He thought back to the very first time he wrote a story and recalled a tool that had helped him write ever since.

"Whenever I write, I imagine everything in Dad's voice," he said. "I try to describe everything with the same energy and enthusiasm he had when he read stories to us. Sometimes when I miss him the most, writing makes me feel like he's there with me. It's almost like he's telling me the story and I'm just writing it down."

The thought brought tears to their eyes. Alex knew exactly what he meant, because her dad's narrative was ingrained in her mind, too. Whenever they thought about John Bailey, they didn't think about the night they lost him, the funeral that followed, or the days they spent mourning him. They remembered the nights when he'd read them fairy tales by the fireplace in their old house, the animated gestures he'd make while acting out every scene, and the different voices he made for each character. Their father was a storyteller in every sense of the word, and Conner had inherited the same gift.

"Dad would be so proud of you, Conner," Alex said. "He would have loved everything about Starboardia."

"He'd be proud of you, too, Alex," Conner said. "Other fifteen-year-olds would have given up on saving the fairy-tale world by now."

The twins laughed at the thought of another brother-and-sister duo going to the same extremes. Alex cast a spell so their roommates snored in silence, and the twins let the sway of the ship rock them to sleep, too.

Chapter Ten

STARBOARDIA

The following morning, the entire ship was awoken by a loud clanging coming from above deck.

"LAAAAAND HOOOO!" Siren Sue yelled, and rang the bell in the crow's nest.

The pirates, the sailors, and the twins quickly swung out of their hammocks and ran up the steps to the lower deck. They dashed to the bowsprit and joined Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson at the front of the ship. The sun had just started rising and slowly shed light on an island directly ahead. It had a beach littered with wooden debris and was covered in a thick forest of tropical trees. The crew could make out the tip of a large fortress towering over the trees in the center of the island.

"That's it!" Conner yelled. "That's Starboardia!"

There wasn't any time to rejoice because the discovery was immediately followed by the thunderous sounds of firing cannons.

"We've got company!" Siren Sue shouted, and pointed to the ocean behind the *Dolly Llama*.

Like a stampede, the twins, the pirates, and the sailors ran across the lower deck, climbed the steps to the upper deck, and crowded the railing at the back of the ship. The five large pirate ships of Smoky-Sails Sam's fleet were so close, they could smell the torches burning above the sails—and the ships were headed right for them.

The ship in the center was the largest and Alex knew it was the *Vengeance* without having to ask. It was the color of charcoal and flew enormous black sails. The *Vengeance*'s sides and bow were covered in metal spikes, making it resemble a large floating cactus. A flag with an image of broken shackles flew proudly at the top of the tallest mast.

All the decks of the five-ship fleet were swarming with pirates eager for a fight. The *Vengeance* fired its cannons at the *Dolly Llama* and cannonballs splashed in the water beside it. Each splash crept closer and closer to the ship.

"We've got to get to the island now!" Conner yelled.

Auburn Sally stood on a barrel and whistled to get her crew's attention. "Everyone gather as many weapons as you can carry and head to the boats," she ordered. "We'll lower ourselves to the water and row to the island."

"They're going to blow the ship apart!" Admiral Jacobson said. "We don't have time to lower the boats! We have to abandon ship now!"

Conner shared a fearful look with his sister and they read each other's mind—a little *more* magic couldn't hurt.

"Everyone follow the captain's orders," Alex said. "I'll keep the pirates busy until we get off the ship."

The crew nodded and split up at once. Alex stood on the railing and faced the oncoming fleet. She twirled her index fingers in the air and two cyclones rose out of the water between the *Dolly Llama* and the *Vengeance*. She pointed at the fleet and the cyclones whizzed toward the pirate ships like bulls released from a pen. The pirates abandoned their vessels and dived into the water. The cyclones crashed into two of the five ships and obliterated them completely.

While Alex stalled the fleet, the crew aboard the *Dolly Llama* unloaded four heavy chests filled with weapons. They stuffed their vests, pants, coats, and boots with as many rifles, swords, and daggers as possible. Conner ran belowdecks and retrieved the twins' backpacks. As he headed back up, he found the Rosary Chicken on the steps behind him.

"Bagawk?" the chicken asked, tilting her head.

"I'm sorry, but battle is no place for a chicken," Conner said. "You need to stay on the ship."

"Bagawk!" she squawked, horribly offended.

"I'm not *calling* you a chicken—you *are* a chicken!" he said. "This is ridiculous! I'm arguing with a typo!"

The Rosary Chicken puffed out her feathers and extended her wings. She had the heart of a turkey, the determination of a duck, and the bravery of a goose. Misspelled or not, she was ready for combat.

"Fine, but you have to stay in my bag," Conner said.

He tucked the Rosary Chicken into his backpack and left the zipper open enough so the chicken could peek her head out. Conner met his sister on the upper deck and handed Alex her backpack. They joined Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson in a boat and were lowered into the water. Once the entire crew was off the *Dolly Llama*, they rowed the boats to the shore of Starboardia.

Smoky-Sails Sam's men weren't too far behind. All five hundred pirates swam after the *Dolly Llama*'s crew. There was so much splashing, it looked like a school of hungry sharks was headed for the island.

"Everyone follow me," Conner told the crew. "The fortress is just through these trees!"

Alex, Auburn Sally, Admiral Jacobson, and the crew followed Conner as he raced through the tropical trees. The admiral's first mate gave Somersault Sydney a piggyback ride so she could keep up. Except for a few birds and a couple of large iguanas, the island was mostly deserted. They emerged into a clearing in the center of the island and found the legendary fortress of Starboardia.

"My God," Auburn Sally said.

"Conner." Alex gasped. "It's amazing!"

It was a breathtaking sight and everyone stopped in their tracks to take it in. The fortress was like a large Mayan pyramid constructed entirely out of broken pieces from hundreds of old ships. Everywhere they looked they spotted masts, bowsprits, sails, planks, bows, wheels, rudders, crow's nests, and flags all pieced together to form one massive structure.

It was twelve levels high and looked like a labyrinth of ladders, slides, rope bridges, swings, and tunnels. It was like a gigantic jungle gym, but it definitely wasn't for children. The structure was built on stilts over a shallow lake with sharp rocks that was home to dozens of alligators. The only way inside the pyramid was up a rickety staircase that led to the first level.

The *Dolly Llama*'s crew carefully climbed up the steps and entered the fortress. The inside was hollow and the bottom floor gave a perfect view of the eleven levels above it. Hanging in the very center of the pyramid like a chandelier was a heavy net filled with a dozen large boulders. It hung from a chain connected to a ceiling full of gears, and was secured by twenty-one ropes. Scattered all over the floor were the safe areas outlined in red that

Conner had informed them about.

"Well," Alex said as she glanced around the fortress uneasily. "Is it like you were expecting?"

"That and more," Conner said breathlessly. "I feel like I planted a seed and all this grew."

The crew heard the trees rustling outside the pyramid. They walked to the edge of the first level and saw Smoky-Sails Sam's army of five hundred pirates emerge into the clearing. The men were so rugged and filthy, they made Auburn Sally's pirates look like contestants in a beauty pageant. They were soaking wet from their swim, and thanks to the red worms Alex had left on the Parakeet Islands, their raggedy clothes were stained with bird droppings. After a wild-goose chase around the Caribbean, the pirates were ready to take out their aggression on the *Dolly Llama*'s crew.

Most of the pirates were covered in tattoos and had missing limbs, teeth, eyeballs, and ears. Their appendages weren't replaced by traditional hooks and peg legs, but rather by daggers, razors blades, and metal spears.

Smoky-Sails Sam was in the last group of pirates to step into the clearing. He was seven feet tall with a long dreadlock beard. His coat, hat, belt, and boots were all made from black leather. A long sword proportionate to his height and a silver revolver hung from his belt. His appearance was just as intimidating as his reputation.

The pirate known as Killy Billy stood beside him. He had large bulging eyes and greasy hair. He was shirtless and his chest, arms, and back were covered with tattooed tally marks—each strike represented someone he had killed.

Just like the *Dolly Llama* crew had, Smoky-Sails Sam's men stared up at the structure in astonishment, as if they were facing a forgotten Wonder of the World.

"What do we have here," Smoky-Sails Sam said in a deep, raspy voice. "It looks like little Christine Connelly has discovered Starboardia."

"Look: up there!" Killy Billy said. He pointed to the crew on the first level of the fortress. "It's the *thief* and her hags! And they have Admiral Jacobson and his navy dogs with them!"

"Joined forces to finish me off, have you?" Smoky-Sails Sam chuckled. "It's going to take more than an ancient *tree house* to defeat my men."

The *Dolly Llama*'s crew gulped in fear. Auburn Sally put on a brave face

and roared with laughter.

"Did you hear that?" the captain asked. "Smoky-Sails Sam thinks he has *men*! It's funny, because I don't see any *men* below us—I only see *swine*."

The pirates roared angrily at the women and men on the pyramid.

"Don't worry, boys," Smoky-Sails Sam said. "We'll put Captain Auburn Sally in her place! Just like everyone who steals from me, *she'll end up at the bottom of the Atlantic*! ATTACK!"

The pirates charged up the staircase and stormed into the fortress. The *Dolly Llama* crew spread out on all levels of the pyramid and Smoky-Sails Sam's men followed them. The clanking of swords echoed through the structure as Auburn Sally's women and Admiral Jacobson's men bravely took on Smoky-Sails Sam's crew.

Once all five hundred pirates were inside the structure, Auburn Sally pointed her pistol at the ropes supporting the net of boulders and fired. The net descended several feet, pulling on the gears above, and the fortress came to life.

The pyramid worked more like a clock than Conner was anticipating. As the gears were pulled by the net, all twelve levels of the fortress rotated. The even levels turned clockwise, the odd levels turned counterclockwise, and the booby traps were triggered. The first chime went off and the *Dolly Llama* crew quickly found areas marked in red to stand on, crouch under, or hide behind.

Winking Wendy and the navy sailors were fighting Sam's pirates on the first level. They stepped into red circles drawn on the floor and watched as all the pirates around them fell through trapdoors and plunged into the lake below the fortress.

The alligators splashed around happily—the conflict above was going to supply the biggest meal they ever had.

The second level of the pyramid was covered in rope bridges. Sam's pirates chased Fish-Lips Lucy around one side and Pancake-Face Patty around the other, and the women met on a red platform between bridges. When the traps were set off, the bridges snapped like large slingshots and the pirates were launched off the pyramid.

Stinky-Feet Phoebe and Peg-Leg Peggy were dueling pirates in a long wooden tunnel between the third and fourth levels. Five seconds after the first chime went off, the women curled into a cubby outlined in red. A

massive stone rolled through the tunnel, knocking Smoky-Sails Sam's men down like bowling pins. It rolled right past the women without leaving a scratch.

On the fifth level, Somersault Sydney and the admiral's first mate were battling eight of Sam's pirates each. They slid under a red platform just as stone blocks from the ceiling fell on top of their attackers. Somersault Sydney barely made it under the platform in time—she would have lost her legs if she hadn't already.

High-Tide Tabitha and Catfish Kate were fighting pirates back to back on a staircase between the sixth and seventh levels. They stayed on the only red step, and the rest of the staircase flattened into a slide. The pirates slid down the slide and into a shoot that dropped them into the lake below.

Big-Booty Bertha had taken a wrong turn on the eighth level and was surrounded by Smoky-Sails Sam's pirates. The floor was tiled and Big-Booty Bertha sighed with relief when she looked down and saw she was standing on the only red tile. Sharp spikes shot up from the floor and pierced through the pirates' feet. They grabbed their injured feet and hopped around in pain. Unfortunately, Big-Booty Bertha's backside was larger than the tile and one of her buttocks was scratched by a spike.

On the ninth level of the pyramid, Siren Sue was running from pirates shooting rifles at her. She dived behind a red door just as an avalanche of logs swept through the level. The pirates were knocked down and rolled off the pyramid with the logs.

Not-So-Jolly Joan and Too-Much-Rum Ronda wandered around the tenth level looking for someplace safe to hide. They weren't paying attention and fell right through a trapdoor and directly into a cage. It wasn't an ideal place to be, but the women figured they were safe enough. Too-Much-Rum Ronda and Not-So-Jolly Joan shared a bottle of rum while they watched their friends battle the pirates around them.

The floor of the eleventh level was covered with unstable floorboards that spun, teetered, or just broke as soon as they were stepped on. Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson fought Sam's pirates while keeping their balance on the stable floorboards painted red. To make matters worse, the eleventh level was also subjected to large swinging blades that the captain and the admiral had to avoid. The blades sliced into Sam's pirates and knocked them out of the pyramid.

From the twelfth and top level of the pyramid, Alex and Conner could see the *Dolly Llama* crew fighting the pirates on all the levels below. Conner heard something rattling at the bottom of his backpack and found that the Rosary Chicken had laid a bunch of eggs inside it—the excitement was too much for her.

"Not so brave now, are you?" Conner said.

The Rosary Chicken lowered her head in shame. The twins threw the eggs at the pirates below, causing them to slip and slide off the structure. They caught the attention of Killy Billy, and the murderous pirate climbed up to the twelfth level, bringing a gang of pirates with him.

"Here, kiddy kiddies," the tattooed pirate called after them. "I've got enough room on my right arm for two more victims!"

"Go take a long walk off a short plank!" Conner yelled back.

Killy Billy and the pirates chased the twins around the top of the fortress. When they reached the south side, the floor crumbled under their feet. The twins spotted red monkey bars above and grabbed them to keep from falling. Unfortunately, Killy Billy and the pirates saw them, too, and hung from them as well. They swung toward the twins and tried to knock them off.

The Rosary Chicken fluttered out of Conner's backpack and began pecking at one of the pirates' fingers until they slipped from the bars. Then she moved on to the next pirate. Soon, Killy Billy was the only pirate left hanging. He kept one hand on the bars and reached for his rifle with the other. Alex gave him a nasty look and all the tally marks tattooed on his body magically turned into ticks. The pests dug into his skin and he screamed. He lost his grip on the bars and fell all the way through the fortress and landed in the lake below. The alligators dived after him, and Killy Billy never resurfaced.

Alex and Conner swung across the bars to solid floor. The Rosary Chicken crawled back into Conner's backpack and boastfully clucked up at him.

"Okay, you've redeemed yourself," Conner said. "Don't get a big head about it. No one likes a cocky chicken."

Every thirty seconds, another chime would ring, another rope would snap, and the *Dolly Llama* crew would find another red zone to shield themselves from the traps of the pyramid. Smoky-Sails Sam's pirates

weren't so lucky. His men were dropping like flies around the fortress. Soon, they were reduced to half their original size, then to a quarter, and then the numbers between Smoky-Sails Sam's crew and the *Dolly Llama* crew were even. At this rate, it wouldn't be long before Sam's men were outnumbered.

Smoky-Sails Sam didn't care about his pirates as much as he cared about retribution. He pushed his way through the structure, carefully avoiding the traps, and headed for Auburn Sally.

When eleven of the twenty-one ropes had snapped and the pyramid was halfway through its course, all the traps ceased and the areas in red stopped being safe zones. Instead, the red platforms, cubbies, and tiles started transporting the *Dolly Llama* crew members to different levels throughout the fortress.

Winking Wendy was catapulted from the first level to the third by a spring hidden in the floor. Siren Sue was dropped into a slide on the ninth level that spat her out on the seventh. The platforms High-Tide Tabitha and Catfish Kate stood on were connected and turned into a lift—High-Tide Tabitha descended into the level below, and her weight sent Catfish Kate into the level above.

Alex and Conner were standing on a red ledge when it suddenly collapsed and dumped them into a small cart. The cart rolled down a hidden track through the pyramid, and the twins felt like they were on a roller coaster. They tripped and pushed all the pirates as they zoomed past them and high-fived the *Dolly Llama* crew as they went.

On the eleventh level, Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson ran across a wooden bridge that suddenly dropped two levels down and swung through the air by chain ropes. Like a faulty elevator, every thirty seconds the bridge descended another two levels. The captain and the admiral would hop off the bridge, help their crew fight the remaining pirates, and then ride it down farther.

The element of surprise was exactly what the *Dolly Llama* crew needed to defeat the remaining pirates of Smoky-Sails Sam's fleet. The pirates lost all sense of the whereabouts of the men and women they were fighting, which left them confused and more vulnerable. By now there were fewer than fifty of Sam's pirates left in the fortress. Not wanting to end up in the lake or fall into a trap, the remaining pirates evacuated the fortress and fled

into the trees.

The *Dolly Llama* had successfully reduced Smoky-Sails Sam's crew to nothing, but there wasn't cause for celebration yet. Smoky-Sails Sam himself was nowhere to be found.

When the captain and the admiral's bridge dropped to the fifth level, Smoky-Sails Sam appeared out of nowhere and leaped onto the bridge with his sword raised.

Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson fought the manic pirate as the bridge swung and spun violently through the air. All three had to keep one hand on the railing so they weren't flung off it.

The *Dolly Llama* crew watched in horror as the bridge descended through the center of the pyramid—but there was nothing anyone could do. The twins' cart reached the first level and slid across the floor. They narrowly missed being crushed as the bridge crashed to the floor beside them.

Smoky-Sails Sam's sword was bent in the crash, so he tossed it aside. The large pirate picked up Auburn Sally by her coat and threw her across the floor. Admiral Jacobson charged him with his sword raised above his head. Smoky-Sails Sam swiftly removed the rifle from his belt and shot the admiral directly in the chest.

"No!" Alex screamed.

"Admiral!" his first mate yelled.

Jacobson's eyes fluttered shut and he collapsed on the floor. Smoky-Sails Sam turned and aimed his rifle at Auburn Sally. Alex tried to think of something magical to save the captain, but she was so distraught, her mind went blank.

"Any last words, *Christine*?" Smoky-Sails Sam growled.

"Yes," Auburn Sally said. *"In Red, Ain't Dead."*

The final chime rang through the structure. Smoky-Sails Sam looked to the floor and saw he had thrown Auburn Sally directly into an area outlined in red. The last rope snapped, and just as Smoky-Sails Sam glanced upward, the heavy net of boulders fell directly on top of him. The Starboardia fortress had finished the job.

It was so quiet, the *Dolly Llama* crew could hear one another's heartbeats. All eyes were on the slain admiral. Everyone assumed the captain was in shock, because she just stared at Admiral Jacobson's body as

if he would get up at any moment.

Tears rolled down Alex's cheeks and she buried her face in her brother's shoulder. "This is so sad," she said. "I can't look."

Conner rubbed his sister's back as he looked around at the devastated men and women throughout the structure. He scrunched his lips to hide a smile—he knew something they didn't.

Admiral Jacobson suddenly sat straight up with a loud gasp that startled everyone in the pyramid. He pulled on a gold chain around his neck and lifted the Heart of the Caribbean out from under his shirt. The bullet had been stopped by the large ruby.

"Ouch," the admiral said as he rubbed his chest. "That still really hurt!"

As far as anyone was concerned, it was a miracle! The fortress vibrated from the crew's thankful cheers. When Alex saw her brother smiling, she hit him in the chest.

"You knew that was going to happen the whole time, didn't you?" she asked. "You knew the admiral was going to live, and you just stood there and let us think he had been killed! You were playing with our emotions for fun!"

His sister's angry accusation made him laugh so hard, he could barely breathe.

"I'm sorry, but I wanted to see your reaction to the end of the story," Conner confessed. "The fact that you were so invested in the characters and didn't see the surprise coming means I did something right, *right*?"

Alex was so mad at her brother, she turned her back and walked a few steps away from him to calm down. Auburn Sally got to her feet and helped the admiral to his.

"Aren't you glad I gave you my heart?" Auburn Sally asked.

"Both times it saved my life," Admiral Jacobson said.

The captain and the admiral shared a passionate kiss, and the *Dolly Llama* crew whistled and hollered at the lovebirds.

"We did it!" Auburn Sally declared. "We defeated Smoky-Sails Sam and his fleet! His reign of terror in the Caribbean is over!"

The men and women cheered even louder than before. They embraced one another and held up their weapons in victory. Not-So-Jolly Joan and Too-Much-Rum Ronda raised their bottle from inside the cage.

"And since Commander Bailey has so generously and bravely helped us

with our enemy, we must return the favor," the admiral added.

The *Dolly Llama* crew went silent and their postures sank. They were hoping to go on a vacation after defeating the most feared pirate on the ocean.

"How do we get there?" Auburn Sally asked. "I hope it's not by sailing in circles to the *left*."

Conner pulled his binder of short stories out of his backpack and set it on the floor. He flipped it open to the glowing pages of "Starboardia," and the beam of light illuminated the fortress.

"It's much easier than that," he said. "We just step through the beam of light and we'll be there in no time."

The pirates and the sailors stared down at the glowing book nervously. Their captain and admiral nodded at them reassuringly, but even they were a little apprehensive. Conner tapped Alex on the shoulder.

"Are you ready to go home, or are you going to stay behind and pout a little longer?" he asked with a sly grin.

It took everything in Alex not to smile back, but after a moment she couldn't resist.

"Okay—I suppose you got me," she said. "You're right, I wouldn't have been so worked up if I didn't care about the characters so much. It's a testament to good writing, and you should be pleased with yourself. I completely forgot we were even in your story. For a few moments there, I truly believed with all my heart that we were living through… through…"

"What?" Conner asked.

"Well." Alex laughed. *"A pirate adventure."*

Chapter Eleven

CURSES

The Masked Man hobbled through the Dwarf Forests as quickly as his injuries would let him. Anyone traveling through the forests alone had the right to be worried, but with the mythological creature on the loose, the thick trees around him were especially intimidating. He held Captain Hook's revolver tightly in his hand and dashed behind a tree whenever he heard a noise nearby.

He followed a river deep into the forest until it split off into Dead Man's Creek. The Masked Man limped alongside the creek, and by nightfall he reached the site where the Witches' Brew used to stand on the banks of the creek. The tavern was nothing but a pile of ruins now, and a hundred or so witches were spread out around the creek.

The Masked Man hid behind a tree and searched the area for his son. Although he had never seen him before, the Masked Man figured he'd be easy to spot in the crowd of tattered women.

Just like the rest of the world, the witches had been chased out of their homes throughout the kingdoms by the Literary Army. They fled to the forest and formed a camp near their former headquarters, constructing huts from the wreckage of the tavern. The witches sat casually in groups around campfires and cauldrons. They chatted and flipped through spell books as if they were magazines.

Whenever a campfire started dying out, Charcoaline would hawk a flaming loogie into it and the fire would re-ignite. Tarantulene had spun a large web between trees and feasted on bats and owls that got caught in it. Serpentina's long tongue picked the bugs crawling through Arboris's bark skin, which pestered Arboris greatly. Rat Mary glared and hissed at a dozen cats that another witch had brought from home.

At the top of the pile of wreckage, two thrones had been erected. The infamous Sea Witch sat on a seat made of multi-colored coral while she supervised the camp of witches. She stroked her pet cuttlefish, which rested in a bowl of salt water on the arm of her chair. Beside the Sea Witch, the second throne was made entirely of ice that never melted, but the seat was empty.

Morina leaned against a tree at the edge of the camp, keeping her distance from the other witches. She scowled at the women around her with disdain. She couldn't wait to cross into the Otherworld and get rid of them. The horned witch watched the moon like it was a clock, counting down the hours till she would put her plan in motion.

The Masked Man had scanned the whole area for a child and finally spotted a little boy chained to the tree Morina leaned on. The boy looked around the camp of witches with large, terrified eyes like he had awoken to a nightmare. The Masked Man was expecting the child to resemble him, but Emmerich looked nothing like his father. His pale skin, rosy cheeks, and dark hair were all trademarks of his mother.

"He's the spitting image of Bo Peep," the Masked Man whispered to himself.

Unlike a normal father, the Masked Man didn't fill with pride or tenderness upon seeing his son for the first time, but only with the eagerness of a possible opportunity. All he needed was to get Emmerich away from the witches—he just didn't know how or when.

A sudden chill filled the forest air, and all the witches stopped what they were doing and looked toward the north. A wave of frost flowed down Dead Man's Creek and froze the water. They heard bells in the distance, and a moment later the legendary Snow Queen appeared on a white sleigh pulled down the creek by two monstrous polar bears.

Emmerich was so frightened by the bears, he closed his eyes and looked the other way. The sleigh stopped in the center of the camp. Arboris and Serpentina helped the blind Snow Queen down. She used a long icicle like a cane. She held up a white sack and exposed her jagged teeth in a wide smile.

"I've found it!" the Snow Queen announced proudly. "I've found the dust!"

All the witches were rather underwhelmed, but they didn't dare show it

on their faces. Morina, on the other hand, couldn't have looked more unimpressed.

"Dust?" Morina asked. "You traveled all the way to the Northern Mountains to bring back *dust*?"

The Snow Queen growled and pointed her cane toward the sound of Morina's voice. "For someone so consumed with the future, you know nothing about the past," she said. "The contents of this bag will ensure our conquest of the Otherworld."

Morina grunted. "By all means, *enlighten* me," she said. "What's in the sack?"

The other witches throughout the camp were curious, too, so they gathered around the Snow Queen.

"Many years ago, before there were witches and before there were fairies, the world was inhabited by angels and demons," the Snow Queen said. "The demons created a magic mirror that transformed the reflection of something pleasant into something foul and grotesque. It made humans look like hideous monsters and landscapes appear as wastelands. The demons got so much pleasure out of torturing the world, they decided to fly the mirror to heaven and torment the angels with it.

"As the demons flew up to heaven, the evil living inside the mirror became so excited, it started to laugh. The closer to heaven they flew, the harder the mirror laughed, until it cracked and vibrated. Just as the demons reached the pearly gates, the mirror was so delighted, it burst into thousands and thousands of pieces that rained onto the earth like *dust*. Most people avoided the dust, but others weren't so lucky. The people that got the dust in their eyes never saw anything pleasurable again, but only the flawed and ugly qualities of everything. Others breathed in the dust and their hearts were filled with hate, anger, and jealousy.

"After centuries of sending blizzards through the kingdoms, I collected the remaining specks," the Snow Queen continued. "My snowflakes cleansed the air and rinsed the land, and brought the dust specks back to me in the North Mountains through evaporation."

The witches were mesmerized by the story, but Morina was still unenthused.

"And what do we need the dust *for*?" she asked.

The Sea Witch crawled down the pile of debris to join the other witches.

“The Snow Queen and I used the dust to curse Ezmia the Enchantress,” the Sea Witch hissed. “Long before she became the dreaded Enchantress, Ezmia was the late Fairy Godmother’s apprentice. The favoritism made all the other fairies jealous, and poor Ezmia was often ostracized, heartbroken, and lonely. Many times she would travel deep into the woods away from the fairies and cry. Ezmia always found the same tree and wept into its roots as if it were a friend’s shoulder. She cried so much, her tears watered the tree and it grew taller than any other tree in the forest.

“Once this became a routine for Ezmia, the Snow Queen and I covered the tree’s roots with the dust of the magic mirror. One day while she was sobbing, she breathed in a piece of it. Immediately, her heartbreak, sorrow, and loneliness were heightened. Her desire to become the next Fairy Godmother and help people was replaced with the desire to seek revenge and inflict pain on those who had wronged her.”

Shivers went up the witches’ spines as they recalled the Enchantress’s terrifying reign over the fairy-tale world.

“We gave Ezmia the steps to create a portal into the Otherworld,” the Snow Queen said. “Once she mastered the seven deadly sins, and dominated the past, present, and future of this world, she would have manifested a portal. Our plan was to travel into the Otherworld, unleash the Enchantress, and take it by storm! Unfortunately, she was killed before the portal was complete.”

“Well, lucky us,” Morina said. “Thanks to *my prediction*, we know a doorway will be formed between worlds, saving us the hassle of building our own portal.”

Charcoaline stepped forward and bowed to the Sea Witch and the Snow Queen before she spoke.

“Is your current plan to curse Alex Bailey with the dust and unleash *her* on the Otherworld?” she asked, and then quickly stepped back with the others.

“Correct,” the Snow Queen said. “However, we already tried cursing Alex with the dust. It sent her down a destructive path, leading to the obliteration of the Witches’ Brew and her departure from the Fairy Council, but it didn’t last for long. Alex is the granddaughter of the Fairy Godmother and a child of both worlds—magic is very strong with her—so it’s going to take more than one piece.”

“How much *dussst* will it take?” Serpentina asked.

“A handful should be enough,” the Sea Witch said.

Morina rolled her eyes. “Are you sure your dust hasn’t expired?” she asked.

The Sea Witch was getting tired of Morina’s disrespectful attitude. She snapped her claws and charged toward Morina, but the Snow Queen held up her cane to stop her.

“See for yourself,” the Snow Queen said.

She opened the bag and the witches peered inside it. The dust from the magic mirror looked like silver sand. With her long, frostbitten fingernail, the Snow Queen removed one piece and blew it toward the polar bears. One of the bears breathed it in through its large nostrils, and its eyes turned bright red. For no reason whatsoever, the bear started uncontrollably beating the other bear.

A violent fight broke out between the polar bears, and the witches quickly backed away from them. The Snow Queen and the Sea Witch cackled at the belligerent beasts. The Snow Queen whistled at the bears, and they sat straight up—resisting the urge to continue fighting.

“I’m still not convinced this will work,” Morina said. “Even if Alex becomes as dangerous as the Enchantress and vanquishes the Otherworld for us, what’s preventing her from unleashing her fury on us?”

All the other witches nodded—Morina had a valid point.

“Just like you, Morina,” the Sea Witch hissed, “the dust has room to be improved. Together, with the magic of all the witches here, we’ll cast a spell on the dust so that once it enters Alex’s system, we’ll be able to control every move she makes.”

The Snow Queen pointed her cane at the ground and a large icy cauldron appeared. She poured the bag of dust into the cauldron.

“Ladies, please join us,” the Sea Witch said.

The Sea Witch and the Snow Queen held their hands over the cauldron and the dust began to glow. One by one, the other witches throughout the camp raised their hands toward the cauldron as well. With each addition, the light shined brighter and brighter. Morina was the most skeptical and the last witch to join in. Once all the witches were united, a powerful spell was cast. The earsplitting sound of a thousand screams emitted from the dust and echoed through the forest.

“It is done,” the Sea Witch said. “Now we must find the girl.”

The Snow Queen removed the cloth covering her eyes, and her empty sockets lit up like trains in dark tunnels. She predicted where the young fairy was, and once the answer came to her, the lights faded and she re-wrapped the cloth over her eyes.

“She’s already in the Otherworld,” the Snow Queen said. “One of us must travel there and make sure she ingests the dust.”

The witches looked around at one another, but there were no volunteers. Although Morina hated following any orders but her own, she knew she was the best candidate for the task. Besides, her plan to betray the witches wouldn’t succeed unless their plan to conquer the Otherworld succeeded first. If she helped them with this, they’d never suspect a thing.

“I’ll go,” Morina said.

“You?” Rat Mary asked. “I’d trust a *fairy* before I’d trust the likes of you.”

“Take a look around you, rodent,” Morina said. “I’m the only witch who could possibly blend into a world of humans. Besides, I traveled there when I captured the Masked Man’s son—I know the location of a portal and how to use it.”

Morina made a good case, and the witches didn’t argue any further. They turned to the Sea Witch and the Snow Queen and let the elders decide.

“Very well,” the Snow Queen said.

“How long before the doorway opens between worlds?” the Sea Witch asked.

“In a fortnight,” Morina said. “I will not have time to return, so I’ll meet you on the other side of the doorway. It will open in the forest, in the clearing of the three boulders. It leads to a large city in the Otherworld. I’ll travel there now, infect Alex with the dust, and be there when you arrive.”

“Do not disappoint us,” the Snow Queen said.

The Sea Witch scooped the dust out of the cauldron with her claws and poured it back into the white sack. A little begrudgingly, she handed the sack over to Morina.

“See you all on the other side,” Morina said.

The witch covered her horns with her hood and journeyed into the forest away from Dead Man’s Creek. She walked with so much determination, she strolled directly past the Masked Man without noticing him.

For the Masked Man's plan of revenge to work, he needed a way into the Otherworld as much as he needed his son. He glanced between Morina and Emmerich, and decided to follow the witch now and come back for the boy later. He trailed after Morina as quietly as possible.

The Sea Witch still had reservations about trusting Morina with the task.

"What if she betrays us?" the Sea Witch asked.

The Snow Queen's blue lips curved into a sinister smile, and a raspy laugh erupted from the back of her throat. "Morina will *try* to betray us, but she will fail," she said. "Once Alex Bailey is under the dust's spell, nothing will stop her—*nothing* !"

Hearing this scared Emmerich more than anything else had since his kidnapping. He whispered to himself and prayed with all his might that Alex might hear him wherever she was.

"They're coming for you.... They're coming for you...."

Chapter Twelve

MAKING A SPLASH ON SYCAMORE DRIVE

It took the Book Huggers three days to find Conner's current address on Sycamore Drive. In their defense, the Bailey family had moved twice in the past four years and it was difficult tracking them down. After camping outside their previous house, the girls pestered the current residents until they finally gave them the forwarding address.

The four teenagers walked purposefully down Sycamore Drive looking for Bob and Charlotte's house. The Book Huggers were on a mission to finally expose the Bailey twins once and for all. A bag with tape recorders and a Polaroid camera swung from Mindy's shoulder. Once they gathered enough evidence, their questionable reputation would be cleared and every school administrator, police officer, and representative in their community would owe them a massive apology.

It was a thrilling and nerve-racking endeavor, and their hearts were pounding as they walked down the street. Wendy got a little carried away and dashed from street lamp to street lamp and mailbox to mailbox like a secret agent.

"Wendy, knock it off!" Mindy ordered. "You're going to draw attention to yourself. Everyone act *natural*!"

Their anxiety was so high, the Book Huggers forgot what *natural* looked like. Cindy walked taller than usual and waved at all the neighbors like she was in a parade. Lindy swung her arms and swiveled her head like a cartoon character. Wendy skipped aggressively and broke a sweat.

"Too natural!" Mindy said. "Lindy, I told you to bring your dog! We would have blended in more if we were walking a basset hound."

“But Angela Lansbury has arthritis in her paws,” Lindy said. “She has to be dragged around on a skateboard! That would have drawn even more attention!”

“Okay, fine, if we can’t move clandestinely, then let’s move quickly,” she said. “The sooner we get out of the view of the public, the better.”

By *the public*, Mindy was referring to an old man watering his lawn, a pair of kids playing basketball, and an overweight cat napping on a porch. None of the neighbors were paying attention to the Book Huggers, let alone suspicious of them.

“There it is!” Cindy said, and pointed to one of the homes. “That’s Conner’s house!”

The Book Huggers bumped into one another as if Cindy were pointing out a poisonous snake.

“Remember,” Mindy said, “if anyone catches us, we’re here for a school project.”

Not so *clandestinely*, they tiptoed up the house’s driveway and crawled on their hands and knees through the flower bed. They regretted wearing shorts and short sleeves, because the roses’ thorns scratched up their arms and legs—but there was no going back now. They slowly sat up and peered through the window.

Inside, the Book Huggers saw Charlotte Gordon vacuuming the living room. The house was spotless, but she was vigorously cleaning anyway, as if the home were covered in invisible dirt only she could see. It had been two and a half days since Charlotte’s children traveled into her son’s short story, and since she hadn’t heard a word from them, cleaning was therapeutic for her overwhelming sense of helplessness.

Conner’s binder of short stories was still in the center of the floor in the exact spot he had left it. Charlotte was afraid she might break something if she moved it, so she carefully cleaned around it.

“Honey, why don’t you have a seat?” Bob said from the couch.

“Not now, I’m distracting myself from my thoughts,” Charlotte said over the vacuum.

Bob got up and pulled the plug, but it didn’t stop his wife. She wiped all the surfaces, fluffed all the pillows, and straightened all the couch cushions.

“Stressing isn’t going to help anything,” he said. “I’m sure they’re going to be just fine. It’s probably taking longer than they thought to track down

Avalon Tammy, or whatever her name was."

"I know," Charlotte said with a sigh. "I wish I was as capable of handling myself as they are of handling themselves. Mothers get trained in how to deliver their children, how to care for and nurture them, how to develop their motor skills and self-esteem—but no one trains you in how to *stop worrying about them*! They say childbirth is the worst part, but it's just the beginning of the pain!"

Charlotte sat on the couch in defeat. Bob sat next to her and put his arm around her.

"I hate to say it, but this is the price you pay for raising two wonderful, intelligent, and responsible young adults," he said.

"I almost wish they weren't so independent," she confessed. "It'd be nice if they needed *their mother* once in a while. Maybe I'd get to see them more often."

The binder suddenly popped open on its own and the beam of light shot straight out of it. A moment later, Conner poked his head out of the beam and had a look around the living room. The sight of Conner's floating head made the eavesdropping Book Huggers flail around the flower bed. They covered one another's mouths so their screams weren't heard.

"Hey guys!" Conner happily greeted his mom and stepdad. "Good news! We found the pirates."

"That's terrific!" Charlotte said. "I was so worried. What took you so long? Was everything all right?"

"Everything went *great*," Conner said with a laugh. "Actually, it couldn't have gone *smoother*. It just took a little longer to track down Auburn Sally than we thought."

"Oh, *Auburn Sally*—that's her name," Bob said. "See, Charlotte, I told you everything was going to be fine."

"Can we bring the pirates into the house now?" Conner asked.

"Just a second," Charlotte said. She retrieved the welcome mat from the porch and set it beside the binder. "Have them wipe their feet on the mat on their way in. I just vacuumed."

Conner nodded and popped back into the world of Starboardia to have a quick word with the *Dolly Llama* crew.

"Remember what I told you guys to say if my mom asks about Starboardia?" he asked.

The pirates and sailors repeated what they had rehearsed. *"It was a piece of cake. Nothing remotely dangerous happened at all,"* they said in unison.

"Perfect," Conner said. "Now, everyone step through the beam and wipe your feet on the mat—my mom just vacuumed."

The pirates and sailors were puzzled—what was *vacuumed*?

One by one, the *Dolly Llama* crew followed Conner through the beam of light and stepped into the house. Not knowing what to expect, the pirates charged inside with their weapons raised—which nearly gave Charlotte and Bob heart attacks.

"Everybody calm down!" Conner ordered. "You're all safe here!"

The living room filled up very quickly with the characters from "Starboardia." They looked around at all the furniture, decorations, and lighting fixtures in awe. It was the most extraordinary place they had ever been to. The spying Book Huggers had their camera and tape recorders ready, but they were so stunned to see the pirates appear, they dropped their devices and just watched in shock.

"It's like we've stepped into the nineteenth century!" Admiral Jacobson said.

"It's the twenty-first century, actually," Bob said.

"This chamber is so elegant," Winking Wendy said. "Does a royal family live here?"

"No—but thank you," Charlotte said. "It's amazing what a couple of throw pillows and an accent chair will do to a room."

Siren Sue was mesmerized by all the framed photographs on the mantel.

"Commander Bailey, these small portraits of you and your sister are so detailed," she said. "Your face was so round when you were younger."

"That's called a *school picture*," Conner said. "And it was right before a growth spurt."

Peg-Leg Peggy stared up at the ceiling in terror. "What sort of torture device is *that*?" she asked, and pointed her rifle at it.

"That's just a ceiling fan," Conner said. "Relax, it's not going to hurt you."

The pirates and sailors split up to explore the house. They bounced on the mattresses in the bedrooms, turned all the lights on and off, used the toilets to splash water on their faces, and opened and closed the appliances in the kitchen.

“I’ve found a cupboard that’s as cold as winter!” Too-Much-Rum Ronda announced. “And it’s full of fruit, vegetables, and colorful liquid!”

“That’s the refrigerator, Ronda—stay out of there!” Conner said. “No one touch anything without asking!”

Charlotte and Bob watched nervously as the crew invaded and inspected every corner of their home. They weren’t sure which pirate or sailor to follow, because everyone clearly needed supervision.

“Conner, we only have one guest bedroom,” Charlotte said. “Where are all your friends supposed to sleep?”

“Don’t worry, none of the pirates or sailors are sleeping inside,” Conner said.

He said it like it should have been a relief, but it only concerned his mother more. Charlotte was going to ask him for more details, but she was distracted when Alex suddenly leaned out from the beam of light.

“Hi, Mom—hi, Bob!” she said, then looked to her brother. “Conner, we’re ready!”

Alex leaned back and disappeared. Conner went to the window and had a good look at the large pool in their backyard.

“Hey, Bob, how deep is the pool?” he asked.

Bob shrugged. “Ten, maybe twelve feet,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

Before Conner could answer, he scooped up the binder and ran into the backyard. The Book Huggers quickly got to their feet and ran to the other side of the property. They peeked between boards and through holes in the fence to see into the backyard. Conner stood at the edge of the pool and aimed the binder’s beam of light directly at the water.

“Go for it, Captain!” he said.

Bob and Charlotte joined Conner outside just in time to see the *Dolly Llama* emerge from the binder and land in the pool. Charlotte and Bob screamed and grabbed on to each other. The splash knocked half the water out of the pool and drenched Conner and his parents.

It was too much for the Book Huggers to take. All four girls fainted at once and collapsed in a pile behind the fence.

“Charlotte,” Bob said quietly, in shock. *“There’s a pirate ship in our pool.…”*

“Sorry,” Conner said. “The captain was adamant about bringing her ship along. But the good news is that the pirates live in it, so you don’t have to

worry about them sleeping in the house."

"Right," Charlotte said with large eyes. *"Nothing to worry about."*

Had the *Dolly Llama* been just a tiny bit bigger, it wouldn't have fit in the pool. Auburn Sally and Alex were standing on the upper deck behind the wheel and had a great view of the neighborhood. The Rosary Chicken was perched on the ship's railing beside them.

"So this is the land of Sycamore Drive?" Auburn Sally asked.

"It's just one of many neighborhood streets in the town," Alex said.

"I like it," the captain said. "The cottages in this village are very charming."

Auburn Sally kicked down a gangplank and she, Alex, and the Rosary Chicken climbed down from the *Dolly Llama*. The Rosary Chicken happily waddled onto the grassy yard and pecked at bugs. The twins introduced Auburn Sally to Bob and Charlotte, and the captain gave them each a very firm handshake.

"It's an honor to meet you," Auburn Sally told them. "You have very crafty children."

"Tell me about it," Charlotte said.

"It's never a dull moment," Bob said. "Wait, is that chicken wearing a rosary?"

Now that the twins had successfully escorted the *Dolly Llama* crew into the Otherworld, they immediately began planning their next venture. Conner opened his binder to the second tab, retrieved the Portal Potion from his backpack, and poured three drops on the pages of his next story. Another beam of light appeared and shined into the sky like a spotlight.

"Time for our second stop," Conner said.

"What's your next story about?" Alex asked.

"'Galaxy Queen' is an intergalactic space odyssey," he explained. "It takes place in the year 3000 and follows the queen of a Cyborg civilization as she travels through the universe."

Alex took a deep breath. "It doesn't get easier after 'Starboardia,' does it?"

"Not really," Conner said. "But at least we *learned* a lot from 'Starboardia.'"

"Is there anything I can help with beforehand?" Alex asked. "Think about it."

“There is, actually—we’re going to need space suits,” he said.

Alex snapped her fingers and their clothes transformed into chic, shiny, and futuristic space suits. Their suits were silver and had round helmets, and there were oxygen tanks attached to their backs.

“These are perfect!” Conner said excitedly.

Charlotte put a hand over her heart. “You both look *so cute*!” she said. “Stay right there—I need a photo of this!”

“Mom, we really don’t have time to take a—”

Charlotte gave her son a dirty look that said a thousand words, but most specifically: *There are fifty pirates in my house and a ship in my backyard pool. You WILL take a photo for me whether you like it or not*. Conner didn’t say another word, and his mother ran into the house and returned with her camera.

“Stand on the grass so I can get the pirate ship in the background,” Charlotte instructed. “That’s nice! Now put your arms around each other—smile! This is going on the Christmas card!”

“Mom, this is top secret! You can’t put this on a Christmas card!” Conner said.

“Calm down, no one is going to know what you’re doing,” Charlotte said. “Everyone will just think we took a vacation to a theme park—you know, like *normal families* do. Okay, now just a couple more with my phone!”

Begrudgingly, the twins smiled and posed as their mother took a dozen pictures. Once she was finished, they were permitted to continue their plans. The twins tightened their helmets, turned their oxygen tanks on, and toed up to the binder of short stories.

“Next stop, ‘Galaxy Queen’!” Conner said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GALAXY QUEEN

The twins stepped into the beam of light and re-entered the world of Conner's handwriting. The words *the universe* stretched around them, and before they knew it, they were floating through an endless galaxy. They were surrounded by thousands and thousands of stars—it was a breathtaking sight, and the twins had never felt so small in their lives.

All gravity disappeared, and the weightlessness gave the twins a falling sensation in the pit of their stomachs that didn't go away. They moved their arms and legs and tried swimming through the emptiness, but there was absolutely nothing to swim against.

Conner barely caught the corner of his binder before it floated out of reach, and tucked it safely into his backpack with the flask of Portal Potion.

In the distance, Alex and Conner could see a large white planet with multi-colored clouds, but they were still thousands of miles away from its atmosphere. The planet looked delicious—like a large piece of candy floating in space.

"What's that?" Alex asked.

"That's Jawbreakeropolous," Conner said. "I had a sweet tooth when I wrote this story."

It was difficult to make out at first, but the twins saw a small light traveling toward the planet. It orbited around Jawbreakeropolous and after the eighth or ninth rotation it shot out a green laser that engulfed the planet. In a matter of seconds, Jawbreakeropolous shrunk and vanished from the universe.

"What just happened?" Alex asked. "Why did the planet disappear?"

"It didn't disappear, it was *uploaded*," Conner explained. "That thing circling Jawbreakeropolous is the *BASK-8*, the Cyborg Queen's spaceship.

She travels the galaxy looking for habitable planets in other star systems' Goldilocks zone. When she finds a planet she likes, her spaceship uploads it into its hard drive, and then she takes it back to her home solar system."

"What's a Goldilocks zone?" Alex asked.

"It's the area of every solar system that's *not too hot* and *not too cold* to host life," Conner said. "That's actually what scientists call it—I swear I'm not making it up!"

"Why does the Cyborg Queen need so many planets?"

"The Cyborgs have outgrown their home planet and need more room," he said. "The queen travels with an army aboard her ship in case she runs into any trouble. We need to get aboard the *BASK-8* and convince her to let us borrow her soldiers."

Conner opened the binder and aimed the beam of light in all directions around him, like a busted lighthouse, to get the *BASK-8*'s attention. It must have done the trick, because the spaceship zoomed toward the twins and within a few seconds was hovering just a hundred yards away from them. The *BASK-8* was the shape and size of a cruise ship. It was made from red steel and had wings like a plane. A cluster of satellites and antennas near the top made the spaceship look like it was wearing a crown.

"Whatever happens, just follow my lead," Conner told his sister. "I'm not going to tell them I'm their creator—I learned that lesson in 'Starboardia'—but I think I've got something up my sleeve that will work."

"You're the boss," Alex said.

Large speakers stuck out on both sides of the *BASK-8* and someone aboard spoke to the twins. The voice was very proper and sounded awfully familiar, but Alex couldn't tell who it reminded her of.

"Attention, unidentified life-forms," the voice said. "Please state your name, species, and home star system."

"I'm Conner Bailey and this is Alex," he announced. "We're human beings from the planet Sycamore Drivious of the Willow Crestian system."

"What are you doing in the middle of space?" the voice asked.

"Our spaceship was hijacked by Orphianotics," Conner said. "Would you mind giving us a lift back to our planet?"

Conner was confident the tall tale would grant them admission to the *BASK-8*, and he gave Alex a thumbs-up. She hoped whatever plan he had cooking was going to work. There was silence from the speaker as whoever

was on the other end considered the request.

"Any enemy of the Orphianotics is a friend of ours," the voice said. "Please, come aboard."

A large compartment door opened and two steel claws reached out of the *BASK-8* and plucked the twins from space like stuffed animals in an arcade prize machine. They were pulled into a large hangar where several smaller spaceships were kept. The *BASK-8* had artificial gravity, so the twins hit the floor as soon as they entered.

Once the compartment door was shut behind them, a pair of automatic doors on the other side of the hangar opened. A lizard the size of a man walked in with two Cyborgs on either side of him.

The lizard had big yellow eyes and red slimy skin and wore a gray jumpsuit with several buttons. The Cyborgs were half human, half robotic in a variety of combinations. Some were human with robotic arms and legs; others were split evenly down the middle. They all wore red goggles and held guns with barrels that pulsated bright blue light. They also wore vests that monitored their heartbeat and/or remaining battery percentage.

Alex and Conner quickly got to their feet and the Cyborgs raised their weapons toward them. The lizard man cautiously looked the twins up and down.

"Neither Sycamore Drivious nor the Willow Crestian system are registered in the intergalactic database," the lizard man said with the same voice they had heard outside.

"Oh…" Conner said. "That's because we hate solicitors."

The lizard man stepped toward the twins to inspect them further.

"You're awfully young to be traveling through the universe by yourselves," the lizard man said. "Were there more in your crew?"

"We had an android chaperone, but the Orphianotics stole him, too," Conner explained. "Darn those filthy creatures!"

The lizard man nodded to the Cyborgs and they lowered their weapons.

"I'm Commander Newters," the lizard man said. "Welcome to the *BASK-8*. You may remove your helmets—this ship is equipped with oxygen."

The twins unscrewed their helmets and shook Commander Newters's hand.

"Thank you so much for rescuing us," Conner said. "We would have

been goners if it weren't for you."

"I'm sorry to hear about your unfortunate encounter with the Orphianotics," Newters said. "The Cyborg Queen has made many exhausting requests to the United Universe Council to ban them from our quadrant of the galaxy, but they won't listen to her."

"What are the Orphianotics?" Alex asked, forgetting to go along with the story her brother was describing. "They stole our ship so quickly, I didn't get a good look at them."

"They're a terrible species," Newters explained. "They destroyed their home planet, and now they travel through the galaxy stealing resources from other star systems."

"But isn't that sort of what the Cyborg Queen does, too?" Alex asked.

"That's *exactly* what the United Universe Council said," Newters said. "Never mind that, we would be happy to escort you to your home planet. The queen loves traveling to new star systems—I'm sure she'd be delighted to see Sycamore Drivious in Willow Crestian."

A loud alarm suddenly went off, startling the twins. The hangar was filled with flashing red lights. Commander Newters and the Cyborgs looked around in panic.

"Oh no!" Newters said. "This is terrible!"

"What's happening—are we under attack?" Alex asked.

"Worse," Newters said. "That alarm means the queen has awoken early from her charging slumber! She's always in a terrible mood if she doesn't get a full twenty hours. I must get to the Command Bridge before she arrives!"

Newters and the Cyborgs bolted through the automatic doors and the twins ran after them. They ran through the spaceship, passing several hallways full of frantic half-human, half-robotic men and women. The alarm was even louder outside the hangar and was accompanied by a voice that repeated, *"The queen is awake, the queen is awake, the queen is awake."*

They finally reached the Command Bridge in the center of the ship. It was a wide room with a gigantic set of windows that had a view of the galaxy ahead. The walls were covered in screens with information about different parts of the spaceship, the queen's location, and the universe around them. There were dozens of control stations scattered around the

Command Bridge like desks in a classroom. Each station was covered in hundreds of blinking buttons, dials, and levers.

In preparation for the Cyborg Queen's arrival, the Cyborg crew throughout the Command Bridge lubricated their joints, tightened their screws, and polished the steel covering their bodies.

"How close is she?" Newters asked the nearest Cyborg.

"She's descending from her chambers now, Commander," the Cyborg said. "The levels of her emotion chip are off the charts—she must be upset about something!"

The Cyborg pointed to the queen's private elevator in the back of the Command Bridge. All the Cyborgs stood at their control stations just as the elevator doors opened. There was a collective hiss as their mechanical bodies compressed into bows. Alex and Conner followed their example and bowed, too.

The Cyborg Queen was more robotic than anyone else aboard the *BASK-8*. She was only humanoid from the chest up, and even that was questionable. Her nose, her chin, and most of her forehead were covered in metal plates. Her left eye was a camera lens, and instead of hair, her head was covered in wires that wove through a beehive of gears like the film in a projector. On the top of her head, above the wires and gears, was a steel crown. The word *QUEEN* blinked on it like the numbers on a digital alarm clock.

The queen had thin metal arms, and her steel body was shaped to look like she was wearing a gown. She had wheels instead of legs and rolled out of the elevator and into the Command Bridge. The twins could tell she was mad because her lens was twitching and a few of her wires snapped and stuck straight up.

"Your Majesty," Commander Newters said with a deep bow. "We weren't expecting you to wake early. Did you have a restful charge?"

"*Someone* left the gravity on in my chambers while I was charging," the Cyborg Queen said sharply. "Not only did it prevent me from a restful charge, but when I awoke, the human side of my face was *puffy*!"

With this, Alex realized why the "Galaxy Queen" was so familiar—she was embarrassed it had taken this long to click. Without a doubt, the Cyborg Queen was based on Red Riding Hood, Commander Newters was based on Froggy, the Orphianotics were based on the orphans Red despised,

the *BASK-8* was a clever play on *basket*, and the Cyborg Queen's passion for collecting planets was based on Red's passion for real estate.

"You *didn't*," Alex whispered to her brother.

Conner knew exactly what she was referring to by her smile.

"Yeah, I *did*," he whispered back.

The Cyborg Queen rolled through the Command Bridge and glared at her Cyborg crew, waiting for one of them to step forward.

"Well?" she said. "Someone better claim responsibility or I'll take away battery privileges for the entire ship!"

The smallest Cyborg in the Command Bridge became so nervous, he began short-circuiting. Sparks flew out of his mechanical neck and his head started spinning. He fell to his metal knees and pleaded for forgiveness.

"I'm so sorry, Your Majesty!" the small Cyborg said. *"I was inspecting the artificial gravity generator and forgot to adjust the pressure in your chambers!"*

The Cyborg Queen rolled her human eye and her lens pointed upward.

"Commander Newters, please have this Cyborg re-started before he catches on fire," she ordered. "And have him re-programmed to remember the priorities of his assignments."

"Yes, ma'am," Newters said, and nodded to the Cyborg soldiers. "Take him to the Upgrade Center."

Against the small Cyborg's will, the soldiers escorted him out of the Command Bridge. The Cyborg Queen rolled to the center of the room and the bottom half of her body transformed into a throne. The Cyborg crew took it as a cue to be seated at their control stations.

"Was Jawbreakeropolous uploaded successfully?" the Cyborg Queen asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Newters said. "It's been safely added to the hard drive and will be a wonderful addition to your home system.

"Then why are we still in *this* solar system?" the queen asked. "Shouldn't we be at Gumdropida by now?"

"We were en route to the next planet when we answered a distress call," Newters informed her.

"A distress call?" the Cyborg Queen asked. "From whom?"

Newters cleared his throat and gestured for the twins to come stand beside him. Alex and Conner cautiously approached Newters and the

Cyborg Queen. Her lens popped several inches out of her head to examine them.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Hello, Your Electronicness," Conner said. "My name is Conner and this is my sister, Alex. We're human beings from the planet Sycamore Drivious of the Willow Crestian system."

The Cyborg Queen squinted her human eye at them. "I've never heard of such places," she said. "What are you doing in this part of the galaxy?"

"We were stranded and left for dead after our ship was stolen by Orphianotics," Alex said. "Your commander kindly saved our lives and brought us aboard."

The mention of the Orphianotics' name infuriated the Cyborg Queen. Two exhaust pipes shot out of her shoulders and steam erupted from them.

"I HATE Orphianotics!" she yelled. "I'll admit there are few alien species I can stomach, but the Orphianotics are *extra-terrible extraterrestrials*! I've begged the United Universe Council to do something about it, but they refuse! They had the audacity to tell me collecting planets is no different from the destruction those scoundrels cause! But I don't *steal resources* from other planets, I just move them into a better neighborhood!"

Conner waited for the Cyborg Queen to let off all her steam before he said another word.

"You know, the Orphianotics aren't allowed in our solar system," he said. "They were kicked out eons ago. If you wouldn't mind giving us a ride back to Sycamore Drivious, we'd love to give you a tour of the Willow Crestian system."

"No Orphianotics, you say?" the Cyborg Queen asked. "Perhaps I should move my planets to your system. What type of star does Willow Crestian revolve around? White dwarf? Blue dwarf? Yellow dwarf? Red giant? I like knowing I have at least two hundred billion years left in a new system before making such a big commitment."

Conner wasn't sure how to answer. "It's a *seventh* dwarf," he said. "Yup, seven white dwarves from the Milky Snow White Galaxy combined into one and *boom*—the Willow Crestian system was formed."

The Cyborg Queen nodded as she gave it some thought. She had never heard of stars combining in such a manner, and the impossibility intrigued her.

“I’d like to see this Willow Crestian,” she said. “We’d be delighted to give you a lift to your home planet. Unfortunately, there are a few stops we need to make along the way. There are a handful of planets I need to inspect and collect before the Orphianotics get to them. I hope you don’t mind waiting.”

“No worries,” Conner said. “We’d be happy to accompany you!”

“Marvelous,” the Cyborg Queen said. “Commander Newters, take us to Gumdropida, please.”

“Full speed to Gumdropida!” Newters ordered the crew.

The Cyborgs went to work pressing buttons at their control stations. The *BASK-8* shot through the galaxy at light speed. The powerful jerk almost knocked Alex over and she screamed. The Cyborg Queen gave her a funny look—surely this wasn’t her first time experiencing light speed.

“She doesn’t get out much,” Conner said.

The *BASK-8* whizzed through the stars and then slowed down as it approached the new planet. Gumdropida was bright orange and covered with snowy mountain ranges. The spaceship orbited the planet, and information about Gumdropida loaded on all the screens in the Command Bridge. A detailed hologram of the planet appeared in front of the Cyborg Queen’s throne.

“Gumdropida,” Newters read from a screen. “It has a diameter of three thousand four hundred seventy-eight miles. Surface temperatures range from negative ninety degrees to positive thirty degrees Fahrenheit. Atmosphere is made of helium. Currently there is no life on the planet, but forty percent of it is habitable for a Cyborg population.”

“It would be perfect for that ski resort I’ve been itching to build,” the Cyborg Queen said. “Upload the planet!”

The green laser shot out of *BASK-8* and surrounded Gumdropida. Just like Jawbreakeropolous had, the orange planet shrank and disappeared from the universe. The words *Upload Complete* appeared on all the screens in the Command Bridge.

“The upload was successful, Your Majesty,” Newters said.

“Splendid. Please proceed to the next planet,” the Cyborg Queen ordered.

The *BASK-8* raced through the galaxy in a different direction and arrived at the next planet. It was green and had white clouds spiraling through its

atmosphere. Whatever sweet tooth Conner had when he wrote this story was contagious, and suddenly Alex had a strong craving for candy.

"Mintune," Newters read from the screen. "It has a diameter of fifty-four thousand six hundred thirty-two miles. Surface temperatures range from five degrees to two hundred and three degrees Fahrenheit. Atmosphere is made up of sulfuric gases. The planet is home to an alien species known as Gas Whales, but only five percent is habitable for a Cyborg population."

"Pass," the Cyborg Queen said. "Five percent isn't worth an upload—and I loathe neighbors. Proceed to the next planet."

The queen was served hot oil in a teacup as the *BASK-8* traveled through space to the next planet. However, when the spaceship arrived, they found nothing but a field of crunchy-looking asteroids.

"Oh dear," Newters said. "It appears Granolia was hit by a comet and this is all that remains. Shall we continue ahead, Your Majesty?"

At first the Cyborg Queen slouched with disappointment, but her attitude quickly changed when an exciting idea popped into her head. The twins knew she had had an idea because a flashing lightbulb stuck out of her crown.

"You know, our solar system could use a *belt*," the queen said. "Upload the asteroids and we'll place them between Blousery and Skirturn when we get home."

The Cyborg crew did as they were told and then proceeded to the next stop. The back-to-back light speed was making Alex a little nauseated. The subsequent planet was a russet color and had a rocky surface.

"Nutfugdus," Newters read from the screen. "It has a diameter of two thousand seven hundred seventy-nine miles. Surface temperatures range from fifty degrees to three hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Atmosphere is very thin and made of carbon monoxide. Fifty-six percent of the planet is habitable for Cyborg life. Nutfugdus once hosted an alien species known as the Desert Ferrets, but they're extinct."

"Wonderful!" the Cyborg Queen said. "I love a good dry heat. Upload!"

Once again, the *BASK-8* crew followed their queen's instructions. When the upload was finished, the spaceship zipped across the galaxy to the location of the following planet. Alex pulled her brother aside as it traveled.

"How much longer until we ask the Cyborg Queen to borrow her army?" Alex asked.

“Soon,” Conner said. “There’s only one more Goldilocks zone left with a planet the queen is going to go nuts over. We’re going to help her upload it in exchange for the use of her Cyborg soldiers.”

“Did you *intentionally* base a story about a queen who steals things from Goldilocks zones on Red Riding Hood?” Alex asked. “I can’t decide if it’s brilliant or brutal.”

“Oh, I never thought about that,” Conner said. “Red is going to kill me if she ever finds out.”

The *BASK-8* arrived at the next planet. It was purple with turquoise rings and by far the most beautiful of all the planets they had visited so far. The Cyborg Queen was enchanted by it. Her throne transformed back into a gown and she rolled over to the hologram to take a closer look at the majestic world.

“What’s the name of *this* beauty?” she asked.

“Lollipopigust, Your Majesty,” Newters read from the monitor. “It has a diameter of three thousand ninety-nine miles. Surface temperatures range from twenty-five degrees to ninety degrees Fahrenheit. Atmosphere is made of pure oxygen, and ninety percent of the planet is habitable for Cyborg life.”

“I LOVE it—it’s meant to be!” the Cyborg Queen said, and clasped her metal hands together. “Upload it immediately! I’ll share Jawbreakeropolous, Gumdropida, and Nutfugdus with the Cyborgs at home, but I want Lollipopigust for myself!”

The green laser engulfed the purple planet. But as Commander Newters read more information about Lollipopigust, a grave expression came over his red face. The commander bolted to a control station and pulled a red lever to abort the mission.

“What are you doing?” the queen demanded.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I just read some troubling information,” Newters said. “One thousand years ago, scientists from another planet sent a vial of insects to Lollipopigust to see if it would sustain life. The high oxygen levels in the atmosphere made the insects grow to enormous sizes and now they dominate the planet. If we upload Lollipopigust, it would be like uploading thousands of tiny viruses into our hard drive! The entire ship would crash.”

The flashing lightbulb reappeared above the Cyborg Queen’s crown.

“Can’t we send the army to Lollipopigust to terminate the insects?” she asked desperately.

Commander Newters shook his head. “The *BASK-8* has been traveling for so long, it doesn’t have enough power to charge the soldiers’ battle batteries,” he said.

The queen’s lightbulb went off again. “Can’t they use their solar panels to charge their battle batteries?” she asked.

Commander Newters gulped. “That would only work while the soldiers were on the surface—but most of the insects live in colonies under the ground,” he explained.

All the Cyborgs knew their queen wouldn’t take the news well, so they dived under their control stations. The Cyborg Queen was so mad, the lightbulb above her crown burst and fiery blasts erupted from her exhaust pipes. Four robot legs wearing boots emerged from her steel gown and stomped the floor. Tears rolled down from her human eye and oil dripped from her lens.

“All I want is every habitable planet within a trillion-mile radius—it’s not like I’m asking for *the world*!” the Cyborg Queen lamented. “Everyone put your brains and A.I. chips together! There’s got to be something we can do!”

Once the fiery blasts had finished, Conner stepped toward the Cyborg Queen and tapped her on the exhaust pipes. Alex had no clue what her brother was up to.

“Excuse me, Your Mechanicalness, but I might have a solution,” he said. “You see, my sister and I just happen to be the children of the best exterminator in the galaxy!”

“We are?” Alex said.

“Yes, *we are*!” Conner said, and sent her a dirty look. “*Meteor Magazine* gave our father four and a half nebulas out of five in their review, and the *Alien Voice* gave him three appendages up! Those are the most popular publications in the Willow Crestian system!”

The Cyborg Queen’s eye and lens darted between Alex and Conner. Her eyebrows turned into tiny windshield wipers and cleaned the tears off her face.

“So the two of you could exterminate all the insects on the planet for me?” the queen asked hopefully.

“We *could*…” Conner said, lowering his head dramatically. “You’ve already been so kind to us by offering transportation back to our planet. I hate to ask you for *another* favor in exchange for exterminating the insects, but there is something *else* my sister and I could use your help with.”

The Cyborg Queen wanted Lollipopigust so badly, she was willing to strike whatever bargain it took. “That’s quite all right, just tell me what you have in mind.”

“It’s not for us, it’s for our friends,” Conner explained. “They live on a small planet called Fairytaletopia in the Storybookian Galaxy. Their planet has recently been invaded by a savage race known as the Literarious Villainomous.”

“Bless you,” Alex said.

Conner ignored his sister. “The Literarious Villainomous are twice as bad as the Orphianotics and ten times more powerful! The worst part is, Fairytaletopia has no way of defending itself.”

“That sounds terrible!” the Cyborg Queen said.

“It is,” Conner said. “But it’s nothing your Cyborg army couldn’t help with. If my sister and I exterminate the insects on Lollipopigust, would you lend us your soldiers to help our friends fight the Literarious Villainomous?”

It wasn’t every day the Cyborg Queen was asked to lend out her army—however, it wasn’t every day she came upon the planet of her dreams, either. She turned to the hologram of Lollipopigust and stroked it with her metal hand.

“Fine,” the Cyborg Queen said. “Wipe that planet clean of insects, and I will let you use my Cyborg army to save Fairytaletopia.”

Conner shook her metal hand appreciatively. “Thank you so much, Your Engineeredness,” he said. “We couldn’t be more grateful! Right, Alex?”

“Sure… *grateful*,” she said unenthusiastically.

“Sure, sure,” the Cyborg Queen said. “Commander Newters, please see that the humans from Sycamore Drivious have everything they need for their extermination plan. I’m going to my chambers now to finish my charge. Please see that the gravity is turned *off*, and wake me when the extermination is over.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Newters said with another deep bow.

The Cyborg Queen rolled into her private elevator and ascended through

the ship. Alex yanked her brother aside.

"Bugs?" she asked. "*That's* your plan? We're going to kill bugs in exchange for soldiers?"

"Oh, come on," Conner said. "We'll get to travel to another planet and shoot at some overgrown pests! It'll be fun—like we're in a video game!"

Alex shook her head—she couldn't believe she had gone into this situation willingly. There were many times when Alex was convinced she and her brother were from different planets, and this just about proved it.

"Commander Newters," Conner said happily, "lead the way!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

UNIVERSAL PESTS

We're going to need two short-range blasters, one Omega GDD, and one Bio-Mat Compass," Conner said. "Oh, and the *2999 Moon Jumper Express* to get us there."

Commander Newters gave him a peculiar look. "You're very well informed as to our armory for someone who's never been aboard this ship before."

As if the *BASK-8*'s arsenal were a vending machine, Newters punched the codes of the devices Conner had requested into a touchscreen and they were brought out on a conveyor belt. The short-range blasters were long and silver with a bright blue light pulsating from the barrels, just like the Cyborg soldiers' guns. The Omega GDD was short and round like a propane tank and had a small keypad at the top. The Bio-Mat Compass looked like a thick silver watch with a holographic arrow.

The commander handed a blaster to each of the twins, and Conner fastened the compass around his wrist. The Omega GDD was heavy, so Alex and Conner carried it together.

"What do the Omega GDD and the Bio-Mat Compass do?" Alex asked.

"The Omega GDD stands for gamma detonation device—it's a very powerful bomb that uses gamma rays to vaporize its targets," Newters explained. "The Bio-Mat Compass detects biological material within a three-hundred-yard radius."

Alex gulped. "I'm sorry I asked," she said.

"To detonate the Omega GDD, type in the code *LRRH215*, wait for confirmation, and then run," Newters said. "The *2999 Moon Jumper Express* is in the spacecraft hangar. I'll show you to it."

The twins followed the commander through the spaceship. The short-

range blasters and Omega GDD made Alex uneasy, and she held them away from her body. She was terrified the tiniest bump or tap would set them off and injure someone. Conner, on the other hand, couldn't have been more excited to be holding the weapons from his story. When he was a kid, he used to spend hours pretending he was fighting evil aliens on a distant planet with the devices now in his hands. He was eager to get to Lollipopigust and live his childhood fantasy.

Conner twirled and pointed the blaster around the halls as they walked through the *BASK-8*. He re-enacted scenes from his favorite action movies and even made the sound effects to go along with it.

"Conner, knock it off!" Alex said. "You're gonna hurt someone with that!"

"Relax, I have the safety on," he said. "Oops—okay, *now* I have the safety on."

The commander and the twins walked through a set of automatic doors and arrived in the hangar. He showed them to a small spacecraft with the words *2999 Moon Jumper Express* engraved along the side of it. The spacecraft was the size of an SUV and looked like a mini version of the *BASK-8*. It was made of red steel and had two wings and a small crown of satellites and antennas. Newters pressed a button on the side of it and the door of the spacecraft slid open. There were two seats inside and compartments to store their weapons, but no sign of steering controls.

"How are we supposed to fly this thing?" Alex asked.

"The *2999 Moon Jumper Express* is controlled from the *BASK-8*," Newters said. "It prevents our spacecraft from being hijacked by Orphianotics—no offense."

Alex was relieved. If her brother had been planning to pilot the *2999 Moon Jumper Express* himself, she wasn't sure they would have made it to Lollipopigust. The twins stored their weapons in the compartments, tightened their helmets, and then strapped themselves into the seats. Newters hesitated before closing the spacecraft door behind them.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" he asked like a concerned father.

"One hundred percent," Conner said. "Once you've exterminated one alien insect species, you've exterminated them all. By the way, would you mind holding on to this until I get back?"

Conner handed the commander his backpack.

"It'll be safe with me," Newters said. "Good luck, exterminators. May the cosmos smile upon you."

The commander moved three fingers in a circle through the air and then pointed to his heart. Conner copied the motion exactly and Alex did her best to mimic him, but it was bizarre to her. Newters shut the door of the *2999 Moon Jumper Express* and headed out of the hangar.

"'May the cosmos smile upon you'?" Alex laughed. "Is that, like, a 'Galaxy Queen' catchphrase?"

"Do you know how hard it is coming up with an original science-fiction saying?" Conner asked. "Nearly impossible."

Once the commander was safely out of the hangar, the large compartment door opened to space. The gravity disappeared and the twins would have floated out of their seats if they weren't strapped in so securely. The engines of the *2999 Moon Jumper Express* roared to life, and the spacecraft flew out of the *BASK-8* hangar and headed toward the planet of Lollipopigust below.

The ride was smooth and serene. The purple planet and its turquoise rings glowed exquisitely. Even though she wasn't thrilled they were en route to exterminate bugs, Alex couldn't deny how amazing it was to be gliding between a massive spaceship and the atmosphere of an alien planet.

"I have to admit, this is pretty cool," she said.

Conner didn't respond. Alex turned to check on him and saw tears glistening in his eyes. He had seen so many things from his imagination come to life, but seeing *an actual planet* was surprisingly emotional.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Conner said. "Just allergies."

"In *space*?" She laughed.

"Yeah, I think there might have been a cat in here before us."

Alex just smiled and didn't press it further. "Well, whatever you're reacting to, thanks for sharing it with me. This is an experience I would never have had without you."

The tender moment was interrupted by a loud beeping sound. The twins looked around the spacecraft nervously, afraid something was broken. The beeping was followed by an automated voice.

"Five… four… three…" it said.

“Conner, what are they counting *DOOOOWN*—”

The *2999 Moon Jumper Express* blasted toward Lollipopigust with the power of a thousand rockets. The twins were slammed back into their seats by so much force, it felt like invisible elephants were sitting on them. Their teeth rattled and their cheeks rippled. They were moving so fast, they couldn’t breathe, let alone speak or scream.

The spacecraft zoomed under the turquoise rings, shot through Lollipopigust’s atmosphere, and headed straight for the purple surface. They were moving thousands of miles per second and showed no sign of slowing down. Right when the twins were convinced the spacecraft was going to crash, it suddenly jerked upright and pointed its engines to the ground. The *2999 Moon Jumper Express* made a surprisingly gentle landing on the Lollipopigustian surface.

The spacecraft door opened automatically. “You’ve arrived at your destination,” said the same automated voice. “Enjoy your visit to *Lo-lee-pop-ee-gust*.”

Alex’s and Conner’s hearts were racing so fast, they felt frozen in one perpetual beat. When their bodies finally caught up with their minds, they both let out a long, terrified, and overdue scream.

“Alex, I think I peed a little.…” Conner said.

“Me too,” she said.

The twins climbed out of their seats and stumbled off the spacecraft. They had a look around the planet’s surface as their hearts returned to normal and feeling came back to their arms and legs.

Lollipopigust was covered in rolling purple hills and had a bright pink sky. The planet’s turquoise rings arched above them and cast a shadow over the ground. The gravity wasn’t as high on the planet as it had been on the *BASK-8*, and the twins felt stronger and lighter in their space suits.

They retrieved the weapons out of the spacecraft’s compartments and ventured onto the planet. Conner glanced between the compass and the land around them, but there wasn’t a sign of life anywhere.

“What kind of bugs are we looking for?” Alex asked. “Ants? Beetles? Flies?”

“The ones we have to find are called *polycrabs*,” Conner told her. “They’re a spider, scorpion, and wasp combination.”

Just the description of the insects made Alex gasp and choke on the air.

"What the heck is wrong with you, Conner?" she asked. *"How could you even think of something so terrible?"*

"Sorry, it was in one of my nightmares," he said. "I thought it'd make a great alien monster, so I put it in the story. It's not like I *planned* to meet any of the villains in my stories."

"If that's what's crawling around your subconscious, you need *deep* psychological help," Alex said. "What's the plan to exterminate them?"

"It'll be simple," Conner said. "All we have to do is find the entrance to their colony, drop the Omega GDD inside, and then take off!"

Alex shook her head. "You and I both know it's never that easy," she said. "Who would have killed these bugs if we weren't here?"

"The Cyborg Queen would have been so desperate, she would have teamed up with the Orphianotics," Conner explained. "They would have exterminated the polycrabs but would have had to share Lollipopigust afterward."

"Then we make a nice plot twist for her," Alex said. "By the way, I've been meaning to ask, what is Commander Newters's deal? How did he end up working for the Cyborg Queen?"

"She saved his planet from being sucked into a black hole," Conner said. "Newters was so thankful, he devoted his life to working for her. Also, it's helpful to have *someone* aboard the *BASK-8* who's not connected to a battery, in case of a power outage."

The Bio-Mat Compass suddenly lit up and an arrow appeared on its screen.

"Looks like we've got our first catch of the day," Conner said.

The compass guided the twins through the purple hills to the edge of a deep, wide hole the size of an empty swimming pool. The compass pointed to something with biological material at the bottom of it. Alex and Conner held their short-range blasters tightly with their fingers against the triggers and cautiously peered into the hole.

Instead of a polycrab, they found a teal worm the size of a small dog. It was chubby and had several rolls like a caterpillar, but was shaped more like a jelly bean than a noodle. It had big black button eyes, no nose, and a wide mouth that was naturally shaped into a smile. The worm merrily rolled around the hole without a care in the world. It laughed and talked to itself like a happy baby.

“That is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” Alex said. “What is it?”

“A Blissworm,” Conner said. “They’re a species of worm that’s always happy, regardless of the situation they’re in. The Blissworms are one of the few remaining species left on this planet. The polycrabs have hunted all the other bugs.”

“What’s it doing at the bottom of the hole?” she asked. “Does it live there?”

“No, the polycrabs dig holes to trap prey,” Conner said. “The poor little guy must have fallen inside.”

The Blissworm certainly didn’t look like it had fallen into a trap. It giggled as it somersaulted across the hole. It looked up at the twins and waved with one of its four tiny hands.

“Oh, let’s rescue it,” Alex said. “It’s too adorable to be eaten.”

The twins lowered their weapons and slid down the side of the hole. The Blissworm was so excited to have company, it curled around their feet and purred like a kitten. Alex petted the friendly bug. Its body felt like a gummy bear.

“I think it likes us,” she said. “Would it survive on earth?”

“You want to take it *home*?” Conner asked.

Alex leaned down and the Blissworm crawled into her arms. It pressed its mouth against the glass of her helmet and gave her a big, slobbery kiss. Alex was filled with a warm fuzzy feeling, and she hugged the Blissworm like it was a long-lost pet.

“You know, maybe we should re-think this extermination thing,” she said. “Maybe instead of *killing* all the polycrabs, we could just set traps and release them on another planet. The polycrabs are really no different from this Blissworm—they never asked to come to Lollipopigust. Let’s be humane about it.”

The Blissworm crawled to the ground and curiously circled the Omega GDD. It stretched its mouth over the top of it and swallowed the bomb whole. Since the detonation device was bigger than the Blissworm, its body stretched around it like a sock over a soda can.

“That worm better cough up our bomb or it’s about to have some really bad heartburn,” Conner said.

“It must be hungry,” Alex said. “What does it usually eat?”

“Space weeds and stuff,” Conner said. “Which is really strange, because

polycrabs don't eat herbivores—they prey on other predators."

Suddenly, the twins and the Blissworm were eclipsed by a large shadow. Alex and Conner turned around and saw an enormous creature climbing into the hole behind them. It had big red eyes, fangs, two claws, eight legs, and three tails like a scorpion. At the tip of each tail was a long, sharp stinger. The creature's fangs dripped with saliva and it snapped its claws as it approached them.

It was easily the most terrifying thing the twins had ever seen and they both froze. The Blissworm waved at the monster and blew it a kiss.

"And *that's* a polycrab," Conner said.

"It has ten limbs and three tails," Alex noted. "That's thirteen appendages—why would you name it a polycrab? *Poly* means seven."

"Oh," Conner said. "That explains why I failed that geometry quiz."

Alex thought making sense of the creature would somehow make it less scary, but it did the opposite. The more she realized how little her brother knew about the alien insect he had created, the more frightening it became.

"Now I get why the worm was in the hole. It wasn't prey—the polycrab was using it as *bait*!" Conner said.

Alex was afraid to even ask. "Bait for what?"

"Us."

The polycrab vaulted toward the twins with its claws and stingers raised. Alex dived behind her brother and used him as a shield.

"Forget what I said about being humane!" Alex yelled. *"Kill it! Kill it! Kill it NOW!"*

Conner pointed his short-range blaster and shot at the creature seconds before it tackled them. A bright blue blast hit the polycrab and it exploded into slime and guts. The innards rained down on the twins, and they almost became sick at the sight of it. Alex tried wiping the guts off her helmet, but they only smeared over the glass.

"Next time, I'm going to need a full itinerary *before* we travel into one of your short stories," she said.

"You got it," Conner said.

The Bio-Mat Compass started flickering more than ever before. The arrow spun out of control as something made of biological material approached the hole aboveground.

"We've got to get out of here!" Conner said.

The twins didn't have time to pry the Omega GDD out of the Blissworm, so they each grabbed one of the worm's hands and carried the Blissworm and weapon out of the hole as one. The Blissworm happily swung between them like it was on a trapeze.

Alex and Conner's problems only became worse aboveground. A dozen polycrabs surrounded them and there were even more running in from all directions. The twins set the Blissworm-covered Omega GDD on the ground and stood back to back. They raised their blasters and pointed them at the approaching polycrabs.

"Ready?" Conner said.

"Ready," Alex said.

"It's exterminating time!"

Alex and Conner opened fire on the polycrabs. The purple hillside was consumed in bright blue blasts and pieces of exploding alien insects. The Blissworm swayed and grooved to the sound of battle like it was a song with an electronic beat.

A polycrab in the twins' blind spots knocked them apart with one stroke of its claw. Alex and Conner tumbled onto the ground in different directions. The polycrabs were even harder to shoot at from the ground. The twins had to quickly roll back and forth to avoid being stepped on or stabbed by a polycrab's stinger.

No matter how many they killed, the monstrous insects kept coming. The polycrabs sprayed webs out of their center stingers, and the twins and the Blissworm became entwined in it. Alex and Conner struggled to break free from the sticky restraints, but their arms and blasters were confined against their torsos. The Blissworm rolled onto its back and tried to make snow angels in the web.

The polycrabs scooped up the twins and the Blissworm. But instead of eating them, the polycrabs carried them off into the distance, scurrying over the purple hills like a school of crabs across the sand.

"Now what?" Alex asked. "Where are they taking us?"

"To their colony to feed us to their queen," Conner said.

The Blissworm clapped giddily, as if they were being taken to an amusement park.

"The worm is right—this is actually a good thing," Conner said. "The deeper we get into the colony, the more effective the Omega GDD will be."

The herd of polycrabs arrived at a huge mound that looked like an anthill the size of a mountain. They crawled into the entrance at the top and then down a long tunnel that snaked deep into the ground. It reminded Alex of the time she and Conner were kidnapped by trolls and goblins and taken to their underground territory.

They entered the largest cavern of the colony. Every inch of it was covered with polycrabs. The insects crawled across the dirt floor and the walls and hung by their tails from the ceiling. The polycrabs snapped their claws, rattled their tails, and hissed in celebration as the twins and the Blissworm were brought inside. The Blissworm waved and pointed at the creatures like it was the front-runner in a polycrab election.

The twins spotted the polycrab queen in the back of the cavern. She was a giant compared to her offspring and shared all their features. The queen also had tall horns protruding out of her head and a pair of wings she wore like a high collar. Under her tails was a thick, long abdomen that curved into a corner of the cavern where she laid eggs. A massive spiderweb hung behind her like a national flag.

Alex noticed the queen bore a slight resemblance to Trollbella. She had a sneaking suspicion the Troll and Goblin Territory was the inspiration behind the polycrab colony.

“Conner, is that supposed to be Trollbella?” Alex asked.

“Of course it is,” he said without shame. “She’s the biggest pest I know!”

The polycrabs carrying the twins and the Blissworm joined a line of other polycrabs headed for the queen. The creatures each presented the queen with a Lollipopigustian insect they had captured that day. The queen looked each victim over and spit green or yellow mucus on it.

“That’s disgusting,” Alex muttered to her brother. “What’s the purpose of that?”

“The queen is separating the prey,” Conner said. “Green mucus means she wants to eat the prey herself, yellow mucus means she wants it to be fed to the larvae, and no mucus…”

The twins watched as the queen inspected an alien that resembled a mantis. When no mucus was produced, the alien was dragged to the center of the cavern and the entire colony attacked it. They savagely tore the insect limb from limb as they feasted upon it. It was hard to watch, and the twins

looked away.

Conner was the first prey the polycrabs in their party presented to the queen. As she examined him, her large red eyes grew even bigger and saliva dripped from her fangs. It was similar to how Trollbella looked at Conner—she wanted him all to herself. The polycrab queen covered him in green mucus, picked him up with her claw, and tossed him into the web behind her.

Just like a fly caught in a spiderweb, the more Conner struggled to free himself, the more entangled he became.

Alex was presented to the queen next. It was no surprise that the queen wasn't nearly as impressed with her as she was with Conner. She spit yellow mucus all over her and Alex was dragged to the corner of eggs.

The Blissworm was the last in their group to be presented to the queen. The worm was delighted to see her and eagerly reached up like it wanted to hug the gigantic insect. The queen didn't even bother inspecting the worm. With no mucus, the polycrabs dragged the Blissworm to the center of the cavern to eat it themselves.

"Shoot! They'll set off the bomb if they eat it!" Conner said. "Alex, do something!"

Both twins were still wrapped in web from their surface encounter with the polycrabs, but Alex managed to free one of her hands and she snapped her fingers. Suddenly, the polycrab queen tilted her head back and let out a massive sneeze, and the Blissworm was showered in green mucus. When the queen looked down and saw the worm, she didn't realize the green mucus was accidental. She picked it up and tossed it into the web behind her, too.

The Blissworm stuck to the web just a few feet away from Conner. The worm waved at him like they were two friends running into each other at the supermarket. The queen continued separating the other prey her children had brought into the colony.

"Conner, I'm going to cast a spell on our space suits to make them web resistant," Alex said. "Hang on."

She snapped her fingers again and the web covering their bodies melted away, freeing their arms and the short-range blasters that had been compressed against their torsos. Conner hung on to the queen's web like it was a wide rope ladder.

Alex heard snapping and crunching sounds coming from nearby—the polycrab eggs had started hatching. The small larvae poked their heads out of the eggs and looked around for their first meal. As soon as one larva noticed Alex, they all turned their heads to her as if they were connected on the same wavelength.

Alex pointed her gun at the newborns and Conner waved to stop her.

"Don't shoot them!" Conner yelled. "We need to activate the Omega GDD before you cause a scene!"

"Then get to it!" Alex said.

Conner climbed across the web to where the Blissworm hung. He pulled the worm off the web with a *snap* and carried it down to the ground. The Blissworm was very heavy with the bomb inside its body. At first he tried pulling the Omega GDD out through the Blissworm's mouth, but the jolly worm made a game of it and kept its mouth tightly shut.

"You stupid little parasite!" Conner said. *"Just spit it out!"*

He tried squeezing the Omega GDD out of the Blissworm, but it only tickled the worm. The Blissworm kept its mouth shut but Conner felt the laughter building up inside of it.

"So you like being tickled, huh?" Conner said. "I'm gonna *goochie-goochie-goo* that bomb right out of you!"

Conner tickled the Blissworm with both hands. The worm had never been so amused in its whole life, and so much laughter built up inside its body that the Omega GDD looked like it was covered in a teal balloon. Finally, the Blissworm couldn't take the tickling anymore and opened its mouth to laugh. The Omega GDD shot out like a cannonball. Luckily Conner grabbed its handle before it got away.

Meanwhile, in the corner, the larvae started crawling out of their eggs. Once they figured out how to walk, they crawled toward Alex. She kicked them away with her boots, but they were relentless. Each egg hosted several larvae, so the number of newborns coming toward her doubled by the second.

"Hurry up!" she yelled at her brother. *"I'm about to become alien baby food!"*

Conner punched *LRRH215* into the Omega GDD keypad and a red light started to flash.

"The Omega GDD will detonate in thirty seconds," said a calm voice

from the device.

"It's set!" Conner announced, and dashed toward his sister.

"Don't forget the Blissworm!" Alex said. *"We can't leave it here!"*

Conner grunted and then dashed back. The Blissworm was waiting with its hands up like a toddler wanting to be lifted, and Conner scooped it up.

The larvae started leaping on Alex—she had no choice but to shoot them. The blasts echoed through the cavern, and all the polycrabs snapped their heads toward her. Conner quickly thought of a distraction to save his sister. He fired his blaster at the corners of the web behind the queen, and it fell on top of her like a net. The polycrab queen hissed and all her children forgot about their newborn siblings and hurried to help her.

Alex and Conner met in the middle of the cavern and ran for the tunnel in the back. The Blissworm waved good-bye to the polycrabs as they passed them. Alex and Conner entered the tunnel and shot at the ceiling behind them as they ran, causing large chunks of dirt to fall and block the passageway so the polycrabs couldn't follow them.

The twins ran as fast as their legs could carry them. The Blissworm held on to Conner's helmet like a jockey clutching the reins of a racehorse. It even slapped Conner's bottom as if that would make him run faster.

"Cut it out!" he said. *"That hurts!"*

They only had a few seconds left before the Omega GDD detonated. They saw light ahead and knew they were almost out of the colony. They heard a thunderous explosion erupt behind them and the whole tunnel vibrated. Alex, Conner, and the Blissworm re-surfaced just in time and rolled down the mound. A powerful gamma ray exploded out of the colony's entrance, vaporizing everything it touched. The purple hills shook and cracked for miles like they had been hit by a powerful earthquake. When the gamma ray dissipated, there was nothing left of the colony but a massive hole in the ground.

With the polycrabs successfully exterminated, Lollipopigust was safe for the *BASK-8* to upload. The twins stayed on the ground as they caught their breath.

"From now on, I'm only writing about bunnies," Conner said, panting.

A spacecraft a teeny bit bigger than the *2999 Moon Jumper Express* descended from the sky and landed near the twins. It was black and its shape was similar to the body of a wolf. *CLAW-DS* was engraved along the

side of the spacecraft. Alex and Conner got to their feet as the Cyborg Queen charged out of the *CLAW-DS* followed by Commander Newters and a handful of Cyborg soldiers.

"Well done, exterminators!" the Cyborg Queen said. "We had a bet going on the *BASK-8* that you wouldn't survive—now I owe my crew a week of double battery privileges!"

The twins could tell she was fully charged because she seemed to be in a much better mood than before. The commander shook the twins' hands and gave Conner his backpack.

"Excellent work," Newters said. "I haven't seen the Cyborg Queen so pleased since the time a constellation was named after her!"

The Cyborg Queen clapped her metal hands and a team of short gray aliens with large heads and eyes ran out of the spacecraft. They carried holographic blueprints, laser measuring tapes, and toolboxes that hovered beside them.

"Who are those guys?" Conner asked.

"Once she was certain you would succeed, Her Majesty had the best architects in the galaxy flown out to immediately start construction on the planet," Newters said.

The Cyborg Queen rotated and pointed the gray aliens to different parts of the Lollipopigustian surface.

"I think I'll build the palace right *there* in the eclipse of the rings so it doesn't get hot in the summer," she thought out loud. "And since there's already a gigantic hole in the ground over there—wish someone had warned me that might happen, but oh well—that's where I'll put the gasoline pool."

The Cyborg Queen rolled over to join the commander and the twins.

"Your Magneticness," Conner said, "now that we've exterminated the polycrabs, may my sister and I borrow your Cyborg army to save our friends?"

"A deal is a deal," she said. "You may take us to Fairytaletopia whenever you're ready."

"Wait, *you're* coming with us?" Alex asked.

"Indeed," the Cyborg Queen said. "They're going to start building my new residence as soon as we take the planet to my home system—I'm going to need something to do while it's being constructed. How long is the journey? I must warn you, anything longer than seventy-four seconds

makes me irritable."

"We're actually going to make a stop in Sycamore Drivious first, but it won't take long at all," he said. "In fact, I just remembered I have a transportation device right here."

Conner reached into his backpack and pulled out his binder of short stories.

"Lovely," the Cyborg Queen said. She rolled away from the twins and covered her nose. "Friendly word of advice: You might want to change before seeing your friends. You both smell horribly of *bug guts*."

Chapter Fifteen

THE APPLE MEETS THE TREE

Emmerich wasn't getting much sleep. The witches at Dead Man's Creek stayed up all night like nocturnal animals. They cackled and brewed foul-smelling potions until the sun came up and then rested during the day. Their loud snoring, growling, and mumbling was impossible for Emmerich to sleep through. Like a neglected pet, he wasn't being fed much, either. So he became weaker the longer he stayed there as the witches' prisoner.

He thought his exhaustion was starting to play tricks on his mind, because one day at sunrise, after all the witches went to bed, he saw a strange man tiptoeing through the camp toward him. He had pale blue eyes and several scratches along the side of his face. He walked with a limp and his left arm was in a sling.

Emmerich had never seen the man before and had no idea what he was doing there. He circled the tree Emmerich was restrained to and quietly untied the chains.

"Who are you?" Emmerich asked.

The man motioned for him to be silent. *"I'm here to rescue you,"* the man whispered.

Once he unwrapped the chains around Emmerich's body, the man offered his good hand and helped the boy to his feet. It was difficult for both of them since the man was injured and Emmerich hadn't been on his feet for a long time.

The man gestured for Emmerich to follow him, and they snuck into the forest, far away from Dead Man's Creek.

"Are you hurt?" the man asked, and inspected the boy front to back.

"No," Emmerich said. "Tired, hungry, and scared—but they didn't harm me."

The man reached into his sling and handed Emmerich an apple. The boy was so hungry, he forgot all politeness and immediately started eating it.

"Make sure you chew your food," the man said with a smile. "Remember what happened to Snow White?"

The Masked Man played the part of a Good Samaritan very well. With just a few kind gestures, he had the little boy convinced he was a hero.

"Thank you for rescuing me," Emmerich said. "Who are you?"

"You don't know who I am?" the man asked.

Emmerich shook his head. The two had never been face-to-face before, but the Masked Man needed to be certain his reputation hadn't found his son first.

"I'm from the Otherworld," the Masked Man lied. "I've come to rescue you and take you back home."

The little boy was so happy about the prospect of going home, tears came to his eyes and he gave the Masked Man a giant hug. It hurt his broken rib, and the Masked Man pushed Emmerich away.

"I'm sorry," Emmerich said. "I've been away from home for a very long time. My mother must be worried sick about me!"

"Right…" the Masked Man said. "Your *mother*."

He paused for a moment to observe his son. The resemblance he shared with Bo Peep was even more striking up close.

"How did you find me?" Emmerich asked.

"Oh," the Masked Man said, thinking on his feet. "Your friends in the Otherworld sent me."

"You mean Conner and Alex?" the boy asked.

The Masked Man was shocked that Emmerich knew the names of his niece and nephew. If he didn't know his own father, how could he possibly know about his cousins?

"Why… *yes*," the Masked Man said.

"Are they here?" Emmerich asked.

The little boy looked around the forest excitedly, as if the twins were about to jump out from behind a tree.

"They're in the Otherworld waiting for us," the Masked Man said.

"How do you know the twins?" Emmerich asked.

The Masked Man needed to be careful with the information he shared—especially if Emmerich was friends with the twins. If his plan was going to

work, he needed his son's absolute trust.

"Have they ever mentioned their uncle Lloyd?" he asked.

"No," Emmerich said. "I didn't even know they had an uncle."

"Good," the Masked Man said. "I mean—*good for me*. Now I get to introduce myself to you. I'm Lloyd Bailey, Alex and Conner's *favorite* uncle."

Emmerich shook the Masked Man's hand as enthusiastically as if he were meeting a member of his own family.

"It's wonderful to meet you," Emmerich said.

"And you as well," the Masked Man said. "Now, we must hurry out of the woods before the witches realize you're gone. I've just returned from following the witch Morina—she led me to a portal in the Eastern Kingdom that will take us to the Otherworld. We must move very quietly, though; it's a dangerous time to be traveling through this world."

The Masked Man led the way and Emmerich followed. Even with an injured leg, the Masked Man moved with so much determination that Emmerich had difficulty keeping up with him. Although his head was filled with a hundred more questions, Emmerich followed the man's instructions to stay quiet.

They traveled through the forest for miles without making a sound. Suddenly, a loud crunch came from under the Masked Man's foot. He looked down at the ground and saw he had stepped on a small statue of a bird made from a pale stone. It was an odd thing to find in the middle of the woods.

"Look, there are more!" Emmerich said.

The boy pointed to the treetops above them. The statue under the man's foot was one of many. The branches were covered with hundreds of stone birds—enough to make an entire flock. Each bird looked terrified, as if it had been frozen while fleeing from a predator.

"What strange decorations," Emmerich said.

"These aren't decorations," the Masked Man said. "They've been turned to stone by a terrible monster creeping through the forest. We need to get far away from here as quickly as possible before we're next!"

Emmerich didn't need any further explanation. He and the Masked Man hurried through the woods faster than before. But even with a monster loose in the woods, Emmerich was glad to be away from Dead Man's Creek.

Little did the boy know, he would have been better off with the witches than in the Masked Man's care.

Chapter Sixteen

FULL HOUSE AND FULL HEARTS

The perseverance of the *Dolly Llama* crew had been put to the test when they entered the Otherworld, but after only one day in the house on Sycamore Drive, the pirates and sailors of "Starboardia" had grown very accustomed to life in the twenty-first century. In fact, they had become a little *too comfortable* for Charlotte's taste. The twins' mother had spent the entire day following pirates and sailors from one room to the next as if she were babysitting fifty toddlers.

Auburn Sally, Admiral Jacobson, Siren Sue, and the navy sailors were spread out in the living room watching television. They shared bowls of popcorn and candy as they watched a program Charlotte didn't recognize.

"What are you watching?" Charlotte asked.

As if it had cast a spell on them, the men and women never looked away from the screen.

"A very wealthy family with very frivolous problems," Auburn Sally said. "It's hard to tell who the parents are, because they *all* act like spoiled children."

"And for whatever reason, we can't stop watching it," Admiral Jacobson said.

Suddenly, they all jumped at the sound of a blender. Charlotte ran into the kitchen to see what the others had gotten into. She found Too-Much-Rum Ronda pouring a red slushy liquid into mugs for herself, Not-So-Jolly Joan, Catfish Kate, and High-Tide Tabitha.

"Can I help you with something, ladies?" Charlotte asked.

"We couldn't be better," Too-Much-Rum Ronda said. "I've recently discovered how to create a marvelous concoction called a strawberry daiquiri! It's a delicious and cold drink that's so sweet, you can't even taste

the rum! It's the nectar of the gods, I tell you! Would you like one?"

"No, thank you," Charlotte said.

Not-So-Jolly Joan, Catfish Kate, and High-Tide Tabitha quickly slurped down their frozen drinks and then held their heads in pain.

"You've poisoned us!" Not-So-Jolly Joan yelled.

"My head is going to explode!" Catfish Kate shouted.

"Quick—put us out of our misery!" High-Tide Tabitha said. She tried to hand Charlotte her rifle.

"Ladies, relax," Charlotte said. "You're having a *brain freeze*—it's what happens when you drink cold beverages too fast. Pace yourselves and it'll go away."

A clump of red slush fell and splattered across the counter. Charlotte looked up and saw the kitchen ceiling was covered with strawberry daiquiri.

"What's all that?" she asked.

"Sorry, that was my first round," Too-Much-Rum Ronda said. "It took me a couple tries before I mastered the pitcher of spinning blades."

Before Charlotte had a chance to clean up the mess, she was distracted by a giant splash that came from the second story. She ran up the stairs and dashed into her and Bob's bathroom.

Winking Wendy and Fish-Lips Lucy were taking a bubble bath in Charlotte's tub fully clothed. Stinky-Feet Phoebe was sitting on the tank of the toilet with her feet in the bowl. She flushed the toilet and sighed with relief as the rushing water gave her a foot massage. All three pirates had clearly gone through Charlotte's things, because they wore green beauty masks and were reading romance novels.

"Hello, Charlotte!" Stinky-Feet Phoebe said. "You blokes certainly know how to live! This is by far my favorite invention of the future."

She patted the side of the toilet happily and flushed it again. Charlotte took a deep breath and slowly let it out. A headache was forming right between her eyes.

"That's not what the toilet is for, Phoebe," Charlotte said.

Stinky-Feet Phoebe was shocked. "Then what *is* its purpose?"

"Human waste," Charlotte said.

The pirate immediately removed her feet from the toilet bowl and wiped them with a hand towel.

"Then what's that bucket in the corner with the pedal that opens the

lid?" Fish-Lips Lucy asked.

"That's a trash can," Charlotte said.

Winking Wendy's and Fish-Lips Lucy's faces filled with guilt.

"I wouldn't look inside it if I were you," Winking Wendy said.

Before Charlotte could reprimand the women in her bathroom, she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye. She stepped into her bedroom and saw that the comforter on her bed had been replaced with a large black flag with the skull of a llama on it. Charlotte rushed to the bedroom window and looked at the pirate ship in the backyard. Big-Booty Bertha was hoisting the lavender bedspread above the *Dolly Llama* like a new flag. The twins' mother hurried downstairs and ran out into the backyard.

"Bertha, that's my comforter!" Charlotte shouted.

"Do you like it?" Big-Booty Bertha asked. "I thought the ship could use a little color. Don't get me wrong, I like our old flag, but this flag says, *'Yes, we're pirates, but we're also totally in touch with our femininity!'"*

Clink-clink! As soon as Charlotte took her first step to climb aboard the ship, she heard a strange sound coming from the side yard. *Clink-clink!* She inspected the noise and found Pancake-Face Patty playing darts with her nicest silverware.

"Stop that!" Charlotte said, and quickly gathered the utensils. *"This is my great-grandmother's silver! It's a family heirloom!"*

"And fine taste she had," Pancake-Face Patty said. "They're very easy to throw. Your great-grandmother must have been quite a bandit!"

Charlotte could feel her blood pressure rising. She went inside and locked herself in the laundry room before she lost her temper. The racket throughout the house was blocked by the sound of the dryer. It was the first peaceful moment Charlotte had had all day. She was so happy to be helpful to her children, but she hadn't expected that watching the pirates and sailors would be such a chaotic task.

There was a knock on the laundry room door and Charlotte cringed.

"What now?" she asked.

"Charlotte, it's Bob," her husband said. "I just got home. Are you all right?"

Charlotte quickly let him in and shut the door before a pirate followed him inside.

“To be honest, I’m losing my mind a little bit,” she confessed. “And these are only the characters from the *first* story! What am I going to do when Alex and Conner get back from ‘Galaxy Queen’? The house is too small for all these people!”

“I think we’ve bitten off more than we can chew,” Bob said. “The sailors made a rope net out of my ties, and the Rosary Chicken turned my hamper into a nest. She also laid eggs in all my shoes—I wish I had been warned before I got dressed for work this morning.”

“And we *both* have to work tomorrow,” Charlotte said. “We can’t leave them in the house alone. They’ll burn it down by the time we get back.”

“It’s not like we can call a sitter,” he said. “And we certainly can’t take them with us to the hospital.”

Bob had unintentionally given Charlotte an idea, and her eyes lit up.

“That’s it!” she said. “What if we take them to the new wing of the children’s hospital? They just finished construction and the inspections don’t start until next week. It’s empty and spacious—exactly what we need!”

Before Bob could argue with her, the dryer door popped open and Somersault Sydney rolled out of it. The pirate was very warm and dizzy. When her eyes stopped spinning, she looked up at Bob and Charlotte.

“What time is it?” Somersault Sydney asked.

“Almost half past five,” Bob said.

“Dang it,” Somersault Sydney said. “I was hoping that was a time machine.”

A loud *crash* came from the living room. Charlotte and Bob sprinted through the house and found their television on the floor with its screen shattered. Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson were helping Siren Sue to her feet beside it.

“What happened?” Charlotte asked.

“The privileged family disappeared and were replaced by a series of merchants,” Auburn Sally explained. “First a woman was bewitching us into purchasing a mop of miracles, then a man swallowed a tiny pebble that soothed his aching bones, and then an old woman fell onto the floor and couldn’t get up!”

Siren Sue looked down at the floor. “I tried to save her,” she said.

Bob and Charlotte looked around their house at all the pirates and sailors

and shared a long sigh.

"You're right," Bob said. "We can't let them stay here. We'll take them to the hospital with us. At least we'll be able to check on them while we're working."

"But they're still going to need supervision," Charlotte said.

Conner's binder of short stories was kept safely in the corner of the living room. The cover flipped open and a beam of light illuminated the house. Alex and Conner stepped out of the beam in their newly cleaned space suits with huge smiles on their faces. The Blissworm sat on Alex's shoulder and *oohed* and *aahed* as it saw their house.

"Hey, guys!" Conner said. "Good news—we've recruited the Cyborg army to help us!"

The pirates and sailors cheered, then stopped, sharing the same puzzled expression.

"What's a Cyborg?" Admiral Jacobson asked.

"You'll see," Conner said. "They'll be in the house shortly. The Cyborg Queen was just waiting on a New Planet Construction Permit from the United Universe Council—it's a long story."

The broken television and the messy kitchen caught the twins' attention.

"What happened in here?" Alex asked. "Was there an earthquake?"

"We need to talk," Charlotte said.

Bob and Charlotte pulled the twins into the dining room for a private word.

"The house is getting smaller by the minute," their mother said. "Bob and I were talking, and we think it might be best if we take your characters to the new wing of the children's hospital. There's lots of room there and no one will see them."

"That's a great idea," Conner said. "I was wondering where we'd put a thousand Cyborg soldiers. Good thinking."

"Which brings us to our next concern," Bob said. "We need help taking care of all these characters—your mother and I can only do so much. Is there anyone you know who can help us supervise?"

The Blissworm raised its hand, confident it was the worm for the job. The twins looked to each other and thought of possible candidates.

"We should probably check in with the others in the fairy-tale world," Alex said. "What if we bring Jack and Goldilocks back to help Mom and

Bob?"

"Yeah, they're probably worried about us," he said. "We can let everyone else know we've recruited half an army—they might need some good news."

Even though the Blissworm had no idea what the twins were talking about, it nodded along approvingly. It was the first time Bob and Charlotte had noticed the worm on Alex's shoulder, and they both took a step back from it.

"How should we get to the fairy-tale world?" Conner asked. "Grandma's old storybook?"

"Yes, but instead of activating the magic within the storybook, we should use the Portal Potion on it," Alex suggested. "We'll have an easier way of getting back here."

Bob and Charlotte listened to Alex and Conner like they were speaking another language, but if the twins were satisfied with this plan, so were they.

"Where is Grandma's old storybook, anyway?" Conner asked.

"It's on the bookshelf in Alex's room upstairs," Charlotte said.

"Great!" Conner said. "Thanks for being so organized, Mom!"

Alex snapped her fingers and their space suits turned into normal clothes again. She handed Charlotte the Blissworm and the twins ran up the stairs to Alex's room. Despite its energetic attempt for a hug, Charlotte held the Blissworm away from her body like it was poisonous.

"Charlotte," Bob said in shock, "there's an alien worm in our house."

In her bedroom upstairs, Alex scanned her bookshelf until she found the spine of her grandma's emerald storybook. She pulled it out and read the golden title aloud.

"The Land of Stories," Alex said.

"More like *The Land of Troubles*." Conner laughed.

Naturally, the book was nostalgic for the twins, but they didn't have time to walk down memory lane. Conner placed the storybook on the floor, removed the flask from his backpack, and poured three drops of the Portal Potion onto the pages. They lit up as another bright beam of light shined out of the book.

While Conner got the storybook ready, the title of another book on the shelf caught Alex's eye: *King Arthur*. It made her heart sink and her face

fall.

"Is something wrong?" Conner asked her.

"Not at all," Alex said. "Go ahead, I'll be right behind you."

Conner stepped into the beam of light and disappeared from the bedroom. Alex pulled her copy of *King Arthur* off the shelf and stared at it. The image on the cover was of an old, weary king seated at the head of a round table. He had bags under his eyes, a long, graying beard, and a mind full of troubles. It made her laugh because the Arthur she knew couldn't have been more different.

Alex wondered what Arthur was doing at that very moment. She wondered if he thought about her as much as she thought about him, if he missed her as much as she missed him, and if he longed to be with her as much as she longed to be with him. Even though it was entirely her choice to leave him in his own world, not a single day went by that she didn't think of him and wonder if she had made the right decision.

Oddly, just holding the book made Alex feel closer to Arthur, as if he were on the other end of an open telephone line. She stuffed the book into her backpack, stepped into the beam of light, and followed her brother into the Land of Stories.

In the world of King Arthur, the once and future king was battling an enchanted scarecrow in the middle of a large open field. The duel would have been a spectacle to any passing observer, but to Arthur it was just another lesson in his training to become the king of England. Merlin and Mother Goose sat in plastic lawn chairs to the side and drank iced tea as they cheered him on.

"That's it, young Arthur!" Merlin said. "Always remember, enemies will come in different shapes, sizes, and materials!"

"Ar-ty! Ar-ty! Ar-ty!" Mother Goose chanted like she was at a football game. "Show that scarecrow who's boss! Kick the hay outta him!"

Arthur was the least enthusiastic of all of them. In fact, he resembled the King Arthur on the cover of Alex's book more than the adventurous young man she remembered. Defeating the scarecrow was an easy challenge, but

his heart wasn't in it. Only one thing had been on Arthur's mind for weeks, and he couldn't let it go.

The scarecrow tackled Arthur to the ground. It punched and kicked him with its soft hay hands, but Arthur didn't even try to shield himself. He just lay on the ground and let the enchanted object beat him.

Merlin and Mother Goose did everything they could to encourage him. They magically set off fireworks, they did the wave like a crowd in a stadium, they even danced with pom-poms, but nothing motivated him.

"He's been depressed since Alex left," Merlin said. "Unless we do something to inspire him soon, England will have a very bleak future."

"Let me talk to him," Mother Goose said. "If there's one thing I'm good at, it's convincing young men to do things against their will. Trust me, I had two dates to every school dance, and it wasn't because of my looks."

Merlin shrugged. He was out of ideas himself and willing to try anything. He snapped his fingers and the scarecrow was disenchanted.

"Let's take a break," Merlin told Arthur. "I need to return to the cottage and stir my wormtail ragu so it won't be lumpy for dinner."

The wizard kissed Mother Goose on the cheek and then headed into the forest to give her and Arthur a moment alone.

"Hey, Arty! Come have a seat next to me," Mother Goose called.

Arthur pushed the scarecrow off his body and sluggishly took Merlin's seat next to her. He kept his eyes on the empty field and let out a deep sigh.

"Why the long face, Arthur?" Mother Goose asked. "You look like I did when the Beatles broke up."

"I'm having a difficult time concentrating on Merlin's lessons," he said. "I don't feel like myself these days."

"Because you miss Alex," she said matter-of-factly.

Arthur's knee-jerk reaction was to deny the accusation, but when he opened his mouth, he couldn't find the words to argue. Instead, he just nodded and sank into his seat. Mother Goose put a comforting hand on his shoulder and smiled sweetly.

"Young love," she said. "It doesn't matter how old you get, you always remember it. You spend five minutes with someone and suddenly you never want to spend a moment apart. They become your sole focus and make you happier, more excited, and more inspired than anything before. They become your armor and give you strength and bravery and make you feel

unstoppable. Life doesn't seem so bad now that you have someone to share it with."

Arthur gulped—he couldn't have described it better himself.

"That is, until it *stops*," Mother Goose said. "Then everything comes to an earth-shattering, heartbreaking, and rude-awakening halt. You feel foolish for ever having been so happy, and embarrassed for letting it show, and the world has never seemed so terrible."

"Sounds familiar," Arthur said.

Mother Goose leaned a little closer to him, and seriousness grew in her eyes.

"Love is wonderful, magical, and beautiful, but it can also be maddening, damaging, and dangerous," she said. "It blinds us more than anything. It makes us selfish, it makes us feel like nothing else matters, and it tricks us into thinking the rest of the world doesn't exist—but it *does* exist. Whether you're on the high or low side of love, the world always moves on."

"So you're saying love is a weakness?" Arthur asked.

"That depends on you," Mother Goose said. "There's a reason we've got hearts *and* brains—we're supposed to listen to them both. A good man follows his heart, but a wise man follows his heart without ignoring his brain. Finding the right balance is one of the hardest parts of life."

"It appears Alex and I are on opposite ends of that scale," Arthur said. "She believes being together would alter my destiny, and I can't imagine a destiny without her."

"Destiny is an awfully big gamble for one relationship," Mother Goose said. "It doesn't matter how strongly you feel about something—even the most stubborn people can change. What if you and Alex grew apart a couple of years down the road? Could you imagine the guilt you'd both feel if you let down the people of England for nothing?"

"But like you said, life is about finding a *balance*," Arthur said. "Surely there's an outcome where we can fulfill our destinies *and* be together? Why does it have to be so black-and-white?"

"Young people from the Otherworld are overly dramatic these days," Mother Goose said. "Every relationship has to be *all-or-nothing*, there's no example of *give-and-take*—I blame television and vampire novels. Alex doesn't want to keep King Arthur from England—so she's keeping King

Arthur away from her."

Arthur went quiet and looked at the sky. He thought over and over again about what Mother Goose had just said. An enticing idea came to him and he smiled from ear to ear.

"Then to prove her wrong, I have to prove she won't be depriving England of anything," he said. "If I accomplish everything in the legend she holds me to, Alex will have nothing to put between us!"

Mother Goose was confused. She was trying to convince Arthur to get over Alex and move on with his life, not to get over his life and move on with Alex. She had no idea how her advice could have backfired so easily.

"I suppose you're right," she said. "Heck, Arty, if you founded Camelot, assembled the Knights of the Round Table, located the Holy Grail, and *still* had feelings for Alex after you were done—I'd take you to her myself."

Arthur looked at Mother Goose with deep desperation in his eyes. "You would?" he asked.

"Um… *sure*," Mother Goose said. "But I think you're missing my—"

"Then I'd better get back to work!" he said.

Arthur excitedly ran back into the field. She wasn't entirely sure how it had happened, but Mother Goose was pleased to see his spirits change. She snapped her fingers and the scarecrow got to its feet. Arthur fought it with more vigor and purpose than he had ever fought anything before.

Merlin returned to the field and couldn't believe his eyes. He sat beside Mother Goose with an astonished look on his face.

"It's a miracle!" Merlin said. "How did you manage it?"

Mother Goose shrugged. "I have such a way with words, even I'm not sure what I said."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

REGROUPING

Alex and Conner stepped through the beam of light and found themselves somewhere near the base of the Northern Mountains in the Northern Kingdom. If it weren't for the range of snowy peaks stretching across the horizon, they wouldn't have recognized the Land of Stories. The smoky sky and the prominent burned smell in the air made them feel like they had stepped into a war zone, not the world of classic fairy tales. But unfortunately, these days they were one and the same.

"This place looks awful," Conner said. "What has Uncle Lloyd done to it?"

"We're not far from the Northern Palace," Alex said. "Let's sneak over and take a look—it might give us some information."

The twins picked up the emerald storybook from the ground next to them and traveled through the woods of the Northern Kingdom, carefully avoiding roads and paths to stay out of sight. Soon the green domes of the Northern Palace came into view above the trees, and the twins crept closer to get a glimpse of it.

If the Northern Palace was any indication, the fairy-tale world was in the worst shape it had ever been in. Snow White's former home was so battered, it was a miracle parts of it were even standing. Captain Hook's flying ship, the *Jolly Roger*, hovered above the palace like a docked hot-air balloon. The grounds were covered with groups of patrolling Winkies and card soldiers.

On the front lawns of the palace, the twins saw villagers constructing three enormous statues: the Wicked Witch of the West, Captain Hook, and the Queen of Hearts. They were watched over by a flock of flying monkeys that pushed and kicked the villagers as they carried supplies past them.

“What have they done to Swan Lake?” Conner exclaimed. “All the villagers from all the kingdoms must be in there!”

“Look up there,” Alex said.

She pointed to the palace balcony, where Captain Hook, the Queen of Hearts, and the Wicked Witch of the West watched the villagers build their monuments. The villains were seated on large cushioned chairs and were being served drinks and sweets by Mr. Smee.

“Where’s Uncle Lloyd?” Alex asked. “Why isn’t he sitting with them or having his own statue constructed?”

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Conner said. “Let’s get to the cave—the others will know.”

Alex held her brother tightly, and with a bright flash she magically transported them to the cave in the mountains. They were expecting to find their friends the Merry Men, the Lost Boys, and soldiers from the Northern and Charming Kingdoms inside, but there wasn’t a trace of them anywhere. The cave was completely empty.

“Where did everybody go?” Alex asked. “You don’t think they were found and captured, do you?”

Conner looked around the vacant cave, fearing the same thing.

“No, they would have put up a fight,” he said. “There’s no sign of a struggle anywhere. They must have moved to a different location.”

“Maybe they left a clue behind so we’d know where to find them,” Alex said.

She and Conner searched the cave, but they didn’t even find a footprint that could lead them in the right direction. They stepped out of the cave and looked around at the forest and the mountains surrounding them. Something large emerged from the trees and caught Conner’s eye.

“I don’t think they left *something* behind—I think they left *someone*,” he said.

Conner gestured to the woods ahead, where a chubby unicorn with a broken horn stood.

“Cornelius!” Alex said excitedly.

The twins ran to the unicorn and gave him a huge hug. He was so happy to see them, he neighed eagerly and did an animated dance with his front hooves.

“Cornelius, we’re looking for Jack and Goldilocks,” Alex said. “Do you

know where they and the others went?"

The unicorn nodded his large head up and down.

"Could you take us there?" Conner asked.

The unicorn knelt to the ground and the twins climbed onto his back. His horn glowed like a lantern, and he raced through the forest faster than any normal horse could. Although they zipped past trees at a high speed, the twins could tell how empty the woods were. They didn't see a single living thing in the forest besides each other.

Cornelius took Alex and Conner deep into the Dwarf Forests, to the West Hills. Neither had been to these parts of the woods before, so they didn't know what to expect or what to look for. The unicorn stopped at a large boulder sticking into the hillside.

"Are you sure this is it?" Alex asked.

Cornelius nodded, but even the unicorn was baffled. Jack and Goldilocks had left him near the cave in case the twins returned, knowing his magic horn would guide them to their new location, but they didn't give him any instructions for what to do once they got there.

"It must be some kind of secret entrance," Conner said.

The twins climbed down off Cornelius and inspected the boulder. They knocked on it as if it were a door, but nothing happened. Alex tried using magic to move it aside, but the boulder didn't move.

"There must be a spell keeping it in place," Alex said. "Hagetta must have charmed it to keep intruders out. It must need some sort of password."

"It doesn't need a password, it needs a whistle," said a voice behind the twins.

Alex and Conner turned and saw Rook Robins standing on a hill nearby. Given their history, the twins weren't overjoyed to see him, but it was nice to see a familiar face nonetheless.

"Rook, it's good to see you!" Alex said. "Do you know where we are?"

"We're in the West Hills of the Dwarf Forests," Rook said. "Jack, Goldilocks, and all the others are hiding in an abandoned mine on the other side of that boulder."

"Do you know how to get inside?" Conner asked.

"Only a special birdcall will open it," Rook said. "But I know another way in. There's a tunnel on the other side of the hills—it's how I got out. Follow me!"

Alex and Conner still had reservations about trusting Rook, but they didn't have another choice. The twins and the unicorn followed him over the hills to a small tunnel whose entrance was camouflaged in the hillside. Rook held back cobwebs like a curtain and escorted Alex, Conner, and Cornelius inside.

Rook had to give the unicorn a big push to squeeze him through the narrow entrance. The tunnel was very long and dark, but thanks to Cornelius's glowing horn, they could see where they were going.

"Do you know why they changed locations?" Alex asked Rook.

"The cave became really crowded after Jack and Goldilocks started rescuing refugees," Rook explained. "My village was among the first they saved from the Literary Army. They've been retrieving people when and where they can, but it's been more difficult since the Masked Man rounded up all the citizens and put them in the lake. The royal families were the last to arrive—Jack and Goldilocks barely saved them from being executed."

Knowing the royals were safe felt like a giant weight was being lifted off the twins' shoulders. They sighed with relief and walked a little taller.

"Where is the Masked Man?" Alex asked. "We didn't see him with the villains at the Northern Palace."

"You haven't heard?" Rook asked.

"We haven't been around in a while," Conner said. "What happened?"

"The Masked Man is dead," he said. "The villains took over and had him killed."

The news made Alex and Conner stop in their tracks.

"Well, that's… *something*," Conner said, and shared a look with his sister.

A person they hated and felt so much anger toward was gone, but on the other hand, a family member was dead. The strangest part was not feeling any grief whatsoever for him.

After thinking about it, they realized the loss didn't really change a thing. The face and name they were fighting against may have changed, but their mission was still the same. Hopefully the battle ahead would be easier without him. Perhaps this meant the Literary Army would implode like a circus without a ringleader.

"Everyone is going to be thrilled to see you," Rook said. "How have you been?"

He unintentionally directed the question at Alex, and her brother suddenly felt like a third wheel. As uncomfortable as it made Conner, it was nothing compared to how Alex felt.

"We've been busy," Alex said. "My brother and I are recruiting an army to help us fight the villains."

"I know I'm still earning your trust back, but let me know if I can help," Rook said.

Alex kept trying to incorporate her brother into the conversation to make it less awkward, but Conner wanted nothing to do with it.

"Thank you, but I think we've got it under control," Alex said. "And for the record, we do trust you."

Rook smiled at her, but there was sadness in his eyes. Obviously, he was hoping to regain a lot more than trust. When Alex didn't smile back, the rest of Rook's face matched his eyes. They continued on through the tunnel, walking in a silence that said a thousand words.

The worst part about life in the abandoned mine was the constant waiting. It might have been easier if the refugees had an indication of what they were waiting *for*, but with each passing day, there was no good or bad news to share. They were becoming so restless that *any* information would have been better than none at all.

To pass the time, the refugees formed a little academy within the mine and taught one another different skills. Jack and the Tin Woodman taught the villagers how to sculpt using their axes. Soon, there wasn't a stalagmite in the mine that hadn't been carved into a squirrel, a beanstalk, a tower, or a mermaid.

Robin Hood and the Merry Men gave the queens archery and sword-throwing lessons. The Sherwood natives became a little invasive of the queens' personal space while showing them how to improve their form and received dirty looks from the kings.

Red's granny and the Old Woman from the Shoe Inn kept the kings and soldiers busy with sewing lessons. After a few days, the men had produced their first quilt and proudly hung it on display for the rest of the mine to see

it.

“Remember, any man can shape a nation with a crown, but it takes a real man to start a quilt from a thread,” Granny said.

Trollbella tried to teach Peter Pan and the Lost Boys to dance, but they weren’t enthusiastic students. It didn’t matter how many times she went over the steps of her routine, the boys only goofed off and teased one another.

“I don’t know how to be more clear with you,” Trollbella said. “It’s step-touch, step-touch, kick-ball-change, reach to the right, reach to the left, kick-ball-change, shimmy to the front, shimmy to the back, pirouette, and pose! There’s no nose-picking, pants-dropping, eye-poking, or tongue-showing in any of my choreography!”

Peter made a funny face at the troll queen behind her back. All the Lost Boys laughed, and she turned around just in time to see it. When Trollbella had first laid eyes on the Boy Who Never Grew Up, she was completely smitten, but the more his true colors showed, the more she disliked him; he was all sparkle and no substance.

The troll queen figured it was time to break the news to him. She looked Peter Pan directly in the eye and caressed his face.

“I had such high hopes for us, but I’m afraid it’s not going to work out,” Trollbella said.

She covered Peter’s mouth to silence his protest, even though he didn’t try to argue.

“We simply have different needs,” Trollbella explained. “I’m looking for *romantic strolls*—you need a *stroller*. I’m looking for *love* and *lust*—you need a *leash.* I’m looking for a *Butterboy*—you’re just a *Buttertoy*. Let’s part as friends.”

Trollbella sauntered away from Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. The boys exchanged puzzled looks, not sure if that was part of the dance lesson or not.

Goldilocks lay in the corner of the mine using Lester as a pillow and Clawdius as a footstool. The expectant mother was overdue and very eager to deliver the baby. Her backaches and irritability increased every day. Jack had to take all sharp objects away from her so she wouldn’t have anything to throw during a mood swing.

Hagetta boiled some herbs in her cauldron and gave the concoction to

Goldilocks for the pain. The Traveling Tradesman dangled a triangular stone on a string over her pregnant belly and studied the movement very closely. Red watched the Tradesman like he was a lunatic.

"What are you doing?" Red asked.

"I'm predicting the child's gender," the Traveling Tradesman said. "If the stone swings in a circle, it's a girl. If it moves back and forth, it's a boy."

"And what if it gets ripped out of your hand and thrown across the mine?" Red asked.

"It's all right. I already know it's going to be a boy," Goldilocks said.

"How could you possibly know that?" Red asked.

"Mother's intuition," Goldilocks said. "It's the one perk that comes with the bloating, the back pain, and the unstable emotions."

"A *niece* would be better for me," Red said. "I could dress her up in little dresses, apply blush to her tiny cheeks, and put dainty bows in her hair! I suppose I could do that with a nephew, too, but he might resent me for it later."

Goldilocks rolled her eyes. "Your request has been submitted," she said.

Red grabbed the string of the Tradesman's triangular stone and forced it to swing in a circle above Goldilocks's stomach, as if that would do the trick.

"Have you chosen a name yet?" Hagetta asked.

"Not yet," Goldilocks said. "I want his name to be special, I want it to mean something and inspire him for his whole life."

"You know, *Red* works for both a boy and a girl," Red said. "And *I* happen to be a very special, meaningful, and inspiring person."

Goldilocks cringed at the thought of bringing another Red into the world.

"Absolutely not," she said. "I want it to be original and freeing, like River or Robin or—*Alex and Conner*!"

Red scrunched her nose and crossed her arms. "How are *Alex* or *Conner* original and freeing?"

"No—Alex and Conner are here!" Goldilocks yelled. *"Look over there!"*

Goldilocks sat up and pointed to the back of the mine. Everyone went dead silent and turned toward where she was pointing. When they saw Alex and Conner entering with Rook and Cornelius, the refugees burst into

cheers and the mine vibrated with joy. Although it hadn't been too long since they'd seen most of them, the twins felt like they were walking into a reunion. Their friends surrounded them and stood in lines to embrace them. There were so many familiar faces they weren't expecting to see, they didn't know who to say hello to first. Everyone looked more tired, thinner, and paler than before. Living in the mine had worn them down.

"It's so wonderful to see you!" Alex said.

"Goldilocks, you look like you're about to explode!" Conner said.

"From your mouth to God's ears," Goldilocks said.

"Are you guys doing okay?" Alex asked. "Is everyone healthy and unharmed?"

"We're taking it one day at a time," Jack said. "How are you two? Where have you been?"

Alex and Conner shared a smile, knowing their news would excite them.

"We've been in the Otherworld recruiting an army to fight the literary villains," Conner announced.

"That's terrific!" the Tin Woodman said. "What kind of army?"

"An army of *my* characters," Conner said. "We've used the Portal Potion on my short stories from school. So far we've enlisted pirates, sailors, and Cyborgs—I'll explain what those are later."

All the refugees turned to the Traveling Tradesman. The old geezer crossed his arms, leaned on a stalagmite, and glared at the others with a look that said *I told you so!*

"That's the best news we've heard in ages," Sir Lampton said. "How soon until it's ready for battle?"

"It won't be long," Alex said. "We just have two more stops and the army will be complete."

"DID YOU HEAR THAT, MEN?" Robin Hood asked the Merry Men. "SOON WE SHALL BE OUT OF THE SHADOWS OF SOLITUDE AND UNDER THE SUNLIGHT OF WAR! HOW MARVELOUS!"

Red pushed past the villagers, animals, and other royals to get closer to the twins. "Excuse me, pardon me, a *real friend* coming through," she said. "Alex and Conner, it's so lovely to see you're all right!" She suddenly grabbed them both by the shirt and looked frantically into their eyes. "You've got to get me out of here! There are peasants, animals, and men who talk to marbles! And Charlie isn't here to calm me down!"

The twins gently removed her hands from their clothes and took a step away.

"That's actually why we're here," Conner said. "Our mom and stepdad are watching my characters for us while we recruit others, but they need a hand. We were hoping a few of you could come back with us to help them supervise. There are more characters than they can handle."

"How many people do you need?" Jack asked.

Alex and Conner looked around the mine. Red wasn't the only one who looked desperate for a break. The twins would have a hard time refusing anyone's help.

"The more the merrier," Conner said. "But let's hurry. The people in this world need us."

Alex set the storybook on the ground and opened the cover. The beam of light was the brightest thing many of the refugees had seen in days and they shielded their eyes from it.

Before Conner could even explain where they were going, Red ran into the beam of light and disappeared from the mine. She was followed by Clawdius, Jack and Goldilocks, Robin Hood and the Merry Men, Lester and the Tin Woodman, and Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. Conner had lost count of how many people were traveling into the Otherworld when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"You've come back for me, Butterboy," Trollbella said. "I don't know why I worried so. You've never let me down before. I know the pain of being away from each other can be overwhelming, so please don't waste your energy with a personal request for me to accompany you—*I'd be delighted to visit the Otherworld*!"

Before Conner could stop her, Trollbella ran into the beam of light with the others.

"Okay, we've definitely got enough help," Conner said. "We should get back and finish recruiting the army. If any of you need us, we'll just be on the other side of this beam."

"We'll stay behind and look after the others," Sir Lampton said.

"Thank you," Alex said. "We'll be back soon with help. Everyone stay safe!"

The twins stepped through the beam of light and returned to the Otherworld. Sir Lampton, Sir Grant, Hagetta, the Traveling Tradesman,

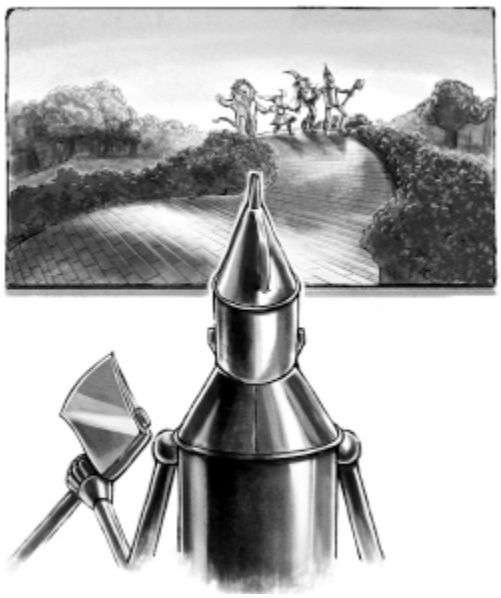
Rook, Cornelius, Red's granny, the Old Woman from the Shoe Inn, the royal families, the villagers, and all the animals lowered their heads in a moment of silence. They all collectively said a prayer for the twins' success to continue and for them to be able to form an army to save the fairy-tale world.

Unfortunately for the occupants that remained, their quiet moment was interrupted by another unexpected visitor. Unbeknownst to Alex and Conner, they had been followed through the Dwarf Forests and into the secret tunnel.

The refugees saw something moving in the back of the mine. They heard hissing and rattling coming from a large silhouette.

"What was that?" Sir Grant asked.

The soldiers drew their swords and walked toward the sounds as a pair of bright red eyes glowed from the shadows. All the refugees froze where they stood, but they were frozen by much more than fear.…



Chapter Eighteen

SAINT ANDREW'S CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

It took five trips in each of Charlotte's and Bob's cars to transport the characters from "Starboardia" to Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital. They covered each pirate and sailor in scrubs and medical masks and quickly escorted them through the hospital to the empty commissary in the brand-new wing.

It would have been simpler if the *Dolly Llama* crew weren't such a curious bunch. They pocketed medical supplies as they passed unoccupied countertops, snuck charts off hospital-room doors, and stole pens out of the lapels of unobservant physicians. By the time they reached the commissary, the pirates' pockets were full of scissors, Band-Aids, and medical tape, and a few of them wore bedpans as hats.

The commissary was a wide and colorful room. It had dozens of tables, hundreds of chairs, adjoining bathrooms, and a large, never-been-used kitchen. It was the perfect place for temporarily hosting Conner's characters.

Ironically, the commissary had been decorated with a classic storybook theme. The walls were covered with murals of Alex and Conner's friends, and the support beams had been painted to look like book spines.

Anticipating her children's return from the fairy-tale world, Charlotte had cleared a space in the corner of the commissary and placed the *Land of Stories* book and Conner's binder of short stories on the floor. Once all the characters from "Starboardia" had been successfully escorted inside, the emerald storybook flipped open and the beam of light appeared.

Red ran out of the beam like a bull released from a pen and looked

around the commissary. She sighed with relief and stretched her arms out.

"Thank God," she said. "I'm indoors!"

"Hi, Red!" Charlotte said. "Long time no see!"

Without even making eye contact with the twins' mother or the *Dolly Llama* crew, Red ran to the window and yanked the blinds open. Rays of sunlight shined inside and Red blissfully spun in them.

"*Daylight*—I've missed you so much!" Red said, and turned to the others. "No one look at me for at least twenty minutes. I haven't seen the sun in weeks! I'm paler than Snow White with a stomach flu!"

"Good to see you, too, Red," Bob said under his breath.

It wasn't long before the others from the fairy-tale world joined her. Clawdius ran out from the beam behind Red. Unlike his mother, the wolf was very social. He did an excited lap around the commissary and visited with every human he saw.

Jack and Goldilocks stepped out of the beam next and Jack helped his pregnant wife to the closest seat. They were joined shortly afterward by Robin Hood, the Merry Men, Lester, the Tin Woodman, Peter Pan, the Lost Boys, and Trollbella. Just like the characters from "Starboardia" did when they arrived on Sycamore Drive, the characters from the fairy-tale world and classic literature stared in awe at the wondrous new world around them.

"Welcome to Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital!" Charlotte said.

"So this is the Otherworld?" Jack said, and whistled at the sight.

"It's *colorful*," Goldilocks said. She side-eyed the decorations. "They certainly make reading a lifestyle here."

Before Bob and Charlotte began the complicated task of introducing the new characters to the old characters, Alex and Conner popped out of the beam of light beside them.

"Oh cool, we're already at the hospital!" Conner said, and cleared his throat. "Ladies, gentlemen, chicken, and Blissworm from my stories, allow me to introduce you to the ladies, gentlemen, goose, and wolf from classic literature and fairy tales."

The introduction didn't go as well as the twins had hoped. The characters circled one another like animals meeting in the wild.

"Pirates!" Peter shouted at the *Dolly Llama* crew.

"Guys, knock it off!" Alex said. "We're all on the same side here. These people are going to help us defeat the Literary Army."

“Sorry,” Peter said. “For whatever reason, I’m always inclined to shout *‘Pirates’* whenever I see them—bad habit.”

The Rosary Chicken fearfully laid an egg as soon as she saw Clawdius, and he chased after her. The Blissworm didn’t want to miss out on the fun, so it jumped aboard the wolf and rode him like a cowboy. Lester thought the Blissworm was the most delicious-looking worm he had ever seen, so he chased after the others, forming a bizarre parade of fictional creatures.

“Rule number one,” Conner said. “No one is allowed to eat anyone else!”

The Rosary Chicken clucked with relief. Clawdius and Lester stopped in their tracks and slumped. The Blissworm tugged on Clawdius’s collar—Conner didn’t say *the fun* had to stop.

It took the fairy-tale characters a few moments to realize that pictures of many of them were painted on the walls throughout the commissary. They walked to their respective murals and stared at the artwork worryingly.

“Look, boys, we’re on the wall!” Peter said, and pointed to a mural of them. “Wait a moment. Is this place a church? Are we *gods* in this world?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Conner said. “People just like your story here.”

The Tin Woodman found himself in a mural of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* but didn’t recognize the three others he was traveling with down the yellow brick road.

“Who are the people I’m linking arms with?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“That’s Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion,” Alex explained. “You would have met them in Oz if we hadn’t found you first.”

“Did *they* drop a barn on me as well?” the Tin Woodman asked.

“Um… I don’t remember,” Alex lied.

Robin Hood and the Merry Men gathered around the mural of *Robin Hood*. The resemblance between the real Merry Men and the painted Merry Men was striking; however, Robin Hood was depicted very effeminately in the painting. He wore bright green tights and had a short curly bob and no facial hair.

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND,” Robin Hood said. “WHAT IS MY MOTHER DOING IN THIS PAINTING?”

Trollbella stared up in awe at a beautiful mural of Cinderella in a ball gown. She smiled from ear to ear and clutched her hands over her heart.

“Oh my Troblin heavens, it looks *just* like me!” she said. “There are

some very talented painters in the Otherworld."

Red let out an earsplitting scream when she saw the mural of *Little Red Riding Hood.* The twins looked between the real Red and the painted Red, but they couldn't figure out what was so offensive. All they saw was an adorable girl in a red cape running from the Big Bad Wolf.

"Red, what's the problem?" Alex asked.

"They made me a *brunette*!" Red yelled.

The twins rolled their eyes. Red turned her back to the room and pouted as she continued soaking up the sun.

"That reminds me," Conner said. "I need to go back to 'Galaxy Queen' and get the Cyborgs."

He went to his binder of short stories, flipped it open to "Galaxy Queen," and vanished into the beam of light. As he went, Alex noticed that Goldilocks and Jack were whispering to each other and suspiciously glaring across the room.

"Is everything okay?" Alex asked.

"Alex, are my hormones driving me mad, or do that man and woman look exactly like Jack and me?" Goldilocks asked.

Alex looked at Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson on the other side of the room. They were also whispering to each other and shooting peculiar glances at Jack and Goldilocks. Clearly they were having the exact same conversation.

"A lot of Conner's characters are based on people he knows," Alex said. "But trust me, it could be a lot worse than the captain and the admiral."

As soon as she said this, the Cyborg Queen charged out of the "Galaxy Queen" beam of light. She ignored everyone in the commissary and rolled directly to the windows where Red stood. Two large solar panels came out of her metal shoulders and she pointed them toward the sun.

"*Daylight*, thank goodness," the Cyborg Queen said. "I haven't had a solar charge in weeks!"

The Cyborg Queen stretched her solar panels so far, she took up the whole window.

"Excuse me," Red said. "You're blocking my light."

"Who says it's *your* light to begin with?" the Cyborg Queen said.

Red was appalled by her rudeness, so she left the window and took a seat by Jack and Goldilocks.

“I don’t know who or what that woman is, but she’s *terrible*,” Red said.

Goldilocks fought a smile and leaned close to Alex. “I see what you mean,” she said.

Conner and Commander Newters hurried out from the “Galaxy Queen” beam and cleared a large area of the commissary, stacking chairs and tables on top of one another until there was a large open space.

“Conner, what’s that for?” Charlotte asked.

“The Cyborgs,” he said.

Newters removed a small remote from his belt and pointed it at the beam. Twenty mechanized wagons carrying fifty Cyborg soldiers each rolled out of the beam of light. The Cyborgs were deactivated and were stacked on top of one another like folding chairs. Newters steered the wagons into the cleared area and parked them.

“Is that… *humane*?” Bob said with wide eyes.

“Probably not,” Newters admitted. “But if we keep them deactivated until battle, we’ll save a fortune on our electric bill.”

The characters settled into groups throughout the commissary like high school cliques. The people of each dimension had their own sets of tables and cautiously eyed one another from afar.

“Will they be okay?” Charlotte asked.

“They’ll warm up to each other,” Conner said, and then whistled to get the room’s attention. “Everybody listen up! Alex and I have to head into my next story to recruit more characters. Everyone please be nice to one another while we’re gone. My mom and Bob are in charge unless they’re at work—then Jack and Goldilocks are in charge.”

The characters from “Starboardia,” “Galaxy Queen,” the *Land of Stories*, Sherwood Forest, Neverland, and Oz all nodded respectfully, then quickly returned to watching one another apprehensively. Alex and Conner hugged Charlotte and Bob and went to the binder of short stories. Conner flipped it open to his next story and poured three drops of the Portal Potion on the pages.

Conner stepped toward the beam of light that appeared, but Alex stopped him before he entered it.

“Hold on a second,” she said. “You’re supposed to tell me what to expect at the next stop—and don’t spare the details this time. If there are bug guts, I want to be prepared.”

“The next story is called ‘The Ziblings,’” Conner explained. “It’s about four kids with superhuman powers. They all lost their parents at an early age and went to live at the same orphanage. One night, an asteroid carrying cosmic radiation hit their orphanage and affected their DNA, giving them phenomenal abilities. They were adopted by a billionaire astrophysicist named Professor Wallet and taken to his laboratory, where he raised them and trained them to become superheroes.”

“Professor *Wallet*?” Alex asked.

“Yeah, I lost my wallet the day I wrote it and thought it was a good name,” Conner said. “Moving on, we’re going to travel to their city and meet them at the scene of a bank robbery. While they’re saving the bank, we’ll sneak inside the Zibling Mobile, follow them back to their secret laboratory, and ask them to join us.”

“Will they cooperate?” she asked.

“The Ziblings are very competitive siblings,” Conner said. “They never pass up a challenge, especially if there’s an opportunity to outshine each other.”

“Okay,” Alex said with a nod. *“Zounds zuper.”*

“Leave the jokes to me,” Conner said.

The twins stepped into the beam of light and disappeared from Saint Andrew’s Children’s Hospital.

Chapter Nineteen

THE ZIBLINGS

Conner's handwriting wiggled and zoomed through the air as the world of "The Ziblings" was created around him and his sister. The word *highway* stretched beneath their feet, and Alex and Conner were suddenly standing in the middle of a wide country road. Cars and large trucks honked and swerved to avoid them, and they dashed to the side of the highway to avoid getting hit.

Alex and Conner looked up and saw a large city-limits sign above them. The sign read:

BIG CITY, USA
POPULATION 7,654,321

Once the handwritten words finished constructing the new dimension, the twins saw that the highway led to an enormous city a couple of miles in the distance. It had the tallest and leanest skyscrapers Alex had ever seen; the skyline looked more like a bundle of pencils and pens than a row of buildings.

"Big City, USA?" Alex asked. "You couldn't come up with anything more original than that?"

"It was supposed to be a placeholder until I came up with a better name, but Big City, USA, grew on me," Conner said. "Now let's go to the bank before it gets robbed without us."

Alex laughed. "Now, *that's* something I've never heard before," she said.

The twins walked down the road and entered the busy city. The world of the Ziblings was like a highly exaggerated version of the Otherworld. The

buildings were more colorful, the streets were cleaner, and the cars were shinier. Even the people were more extravagant. The men were taller and had broader shoulders and wider jaws. The women had impeccable hair, makeup, and clothes. Even the children were cuter and better behaved. It was like the twins had entered a 1950s cartoon.

Alex and Conner zigzagged through the city streets. They walked down Main Street, made a right on Center Road, and then a left on First Avenue. Alex wasn't sure which city Conner was emulating for "The Ziblings" setting because Big City, USA, had characteristics of every American city she could think of. There were subway stations like in New York City, bridges like in San Francisco, surrounding Great Lakes like in Chicago, and BIG CITY, USA, was written across a hillside like the Hollywood sign.

They eventually found Big City Bank, in the middle of First Avenue. It was a large white building with thick pillars and a massive dome. It reminded Alex of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. The twins walked up the front steps and went inside.

The bank had marble floors, golden pillars, and wooden counters. There were high ceilings, tall windows, and lots of elaborate lighting structures. A long line of Big City citizens waited patiently to be helped by one of a dozen bank tellers. There were also desks scattered throughout the bank where bankers helped other citizens open new accounts and apply for loans. No one appeared to have been rejected, because all the applicants had big smiles on their faces as they happily shook the bankers' hands.

Conner took his sister to the far end of the bank, near a back door. He got down on the floor, lay facedown, and put his hands over his head.

"Are you doing yoga?" Alex asked.

"No, I'm getting ready," he said. "We're just in time."

"For what?"

"The *robbery*," he said, as if it were obvious. "It should be starting in five… four… three… two…"

Five armed robbers stormed into the bank. They wore all black and had mouse ears and whiskers attached to their masks. The robbers fired their guns into the air to get everyone's attention. It was startling even to Alex, and she'd known it was coming.

"Everyone on the ground now!" the largest robber shouted. "Facedown

with your hands on your heads! No talking! Don't make me tell you twice!"

The citizens screamed and did what they were told. Alex joined her brother on the floor and copied his pose. The robbers threw big duffel bags on the wooden counters and pointed their guns at the tellers.

"Empty the safe!" the largest robber shouted. "And don't you dare try any funny business or I'll blow you all to the sky!"

The trembling tellers did what the robbers demanded. They opened the gigantic safe in the back of the bank and began filling the duffel bags with stacks of cash and bars of gold.

"What's up with the ears and whiskers on their masks?" Alex whispered to her brother.

"It's part of their gimmick," he said. "These guys are called *the Rat Pack*—they're the most infamous bank robbers in Big City, USA. The tallest one's name is Frank, he's the leader, and then there are his henchmen: Sammy, Dean, Joey, and Peter."

"Just like the Rat Pack from the sixties!" Alex said.

Conner scrunched his forehead. "Dang it!" he said. "I thought I made it up—I must have heard about them from someone."

"You two! I said no talking!" Frank yelled, pointing his gun at the twins.

Alex and Conner went silent. The Rat Pack walked around the bank and patrolled their hostages. They nudged the terrified citizens with their feet and laughed wildly as the hostages cowered and squirmed. After a few minutes of lying uncomfortably on the floor and watching the robbers torment the men and women, Alex was very eager to see the Ziblings come to the rescue. It was taking all her self-control not to transform the Rat Pack into actual rodents.

Conner tapped his sister and gestured to one of the windows. Alex looked up and saw the silhouette of a man wearing a cape. He stood heroically with his hands on his hips. Alex was so excited to see a real superhero that her stomach filled with butterflies, but the feeling quickly subsided. It took a moment for the superhero to enter the bank, not because he was conducting a plan, but because he couldn't open the window.

Finally, with a strong tug, the hero managed to pry it open. He crawled through the small opening, but then he stepped on his cape and slipped off the windowsill. He crashed onto the floor behind a desk with a very loud *thump*. Everyone in the bank heard the crash and jerked their head toward

it. The Rat Pack clutched their guns tighter and slowly approached the desk. The hostages waited on pins and needles, hoping it was someone who had come to their rescue.

The superhero jumped out from behind the desk and struck the same heroic pose he had held in the window. After a closer look, Alex was surprised to see he was actually an adorable boy no more than twelve years old. He wore a sky-blue suit and a dark blue mask, with matching gloves, boots, and cape. He had messy dark hair, plump cheeks, and green eyes.

Upon seeing him, the robbers snickered and the hostages lost all hope. Apparently no one had much faith in the hero's capability.

"Don't worry, boys, it's just Bolt." Frank laughed. "The Ziblings have sent the *runt* of the litter!"

Bolt shifted uncomfortably at the blatant disrespect.

"Hello, Rat Pack," the boy said in a tone obviously deeper than his real voice. "I see you've escaped prison and gone right back to your old tricks. I guess you can take the rats out of the garbage, but you can't take the garbage out of the rats!"

"'But you can't take the garbage out of the rats,'" Frank mocked him. "You really need to work on your playful jargon if you want to be taken seriously."

"And *you* need to work on following the law," Bolt said. "Good thing there are people like me to put you back in your place!"

Frank turned to his henchmen. *"Get him,"* he said. "But don't waste your bullets—he isn't worth it."

The boy's face turned bright red. "Oh, yes I am!" he argued. "I'm worth all the bullets you got!"

Bolt became angry and his superpowers were activated. His body was covered in static electricity, his messy hair rose above his head, and tiny electric waves buzzed around his fingertips. Bolt somersaulted toward Frank, and with the lightest touch of his index finger, he zapped the robber on the leg.

"Ouch," Frank said. "That *almost* hurt a little."

The boy cartwheeled to Sammy and Dean and shocked them on the arms. He dived to the other side of the bank and zapped Joey on the nose and Peter on the ear. Bolt was very proud of himself, but his efforts did little to wound the Rat Pack. They just looked more irritated than before.

“I changed my mind. *Shoot him*,” Frank instructed.

Bolt flew through the air to avoid the bullet, not with the grace of an eagle or a hawk, but with the clumsiness of a baby bird. His erratic flight pattern made it very difficult for the Rat Pack to aim their guns at him, so they flipped their weapons over and swung them like baseball bats. Frank knocked Bolt out of the air and the not-so-super-hero hit the floor.

“Tie him up,” Frank ordered, and eyed the hostages. “And for the rest of you—show’s over, *back to work*!”

The Rat Pack tied Bolt to a chair and the tellers continued emptying the vault. Eventually the vault was cleared out entirely and the duffel bags were bulging with cash and gold. The tellers handed the bags back to the Rat Pack and the robbers headed for the door. Bolt tried to free himself from the restraints, but they were too strong.

“This transaction has been a *pleasure*,” Frank announced to the bank. “See you next time!”

Suddenly, a thunderous *crash* came from above. Three more superheroes dropped in from the domed ceiling—*the rest of the Ziblings had arrived*!

The oldest Zibling was about sixteen and very athletic. He wore a bright yellow tank top, baggy yellow pants, big sneakers, and a headband. His muscly arms were bare and caught fire as soon as he touched the ground.

The second-oldest Zibling was a fifteen-year-old girl. She wore a pink suit with a built-in miniskirt. She had sandy-blond hair that was braided into two long pigtails. She had complete control over her hair and twirled her braids like the blades of a helicopter until she came to a safe landing.

The third-oldest Zibling wore a dark green suit and a leather jacket. Instead of a mask, he wore very dark sunglasses. His arms transformed into large feathered wings as he glided to the floor, then transformed back once he landed.

All the citizens, tellers, and bankers sighed with relief at the older Ziblings’ arrival. The Rat Pack robbers simultaneously gulped and eyed one another nervously. Bolt rolled his eyes at his siblings’ splashy entrance—he had been hoping to handle the Rat Pack without them.

“Hello, Frank, Sammy, Dean, Joey, and Peter,” the oldest said, acting as the Ziblings’ leader. “Have you come out of the sewer for fresh air?”

“Hello, Blaze, Whipney, and Morph,” Frank said. “Have you come to save your little brother?”

"I don't need to be saved!" Bolt said. *"Being tied to this chair is part of my plan, which you guys are kind of ruining!"*

The Ziblings ignored their little brother as if he weren't even in the room. They locked eyes with the Rat Pack and never looked away.

"We've come to take you and your boys back to prison, Frank," Blaze said. "You belong in a cage just like all the other rodents."

The Ziblings charged toward the Rat Pack and the robbers ran for the door.

Morph jumped in front of them and transformed into a brick wall. His sunglasses were his only remaining physical trait. He was now blocking the robbers' exit, so they ran for the back door. Whipney whipped her head back and forth and her braids wrapped around Sammy's and Dean's ankles. She raised them into the air and knocked them into each other, and they fell unconscious to the ground.

Joey and Peter aimed their guns at Blaze. He pointed at them and two fiery geysers blasted out of his fingertips. The robbers were set on fire and they dropped to the floor and rolled around to extinguish the flames. Morph transformed into a huge cage and Whipney scooped up Dean, Sammy, Joey, and Peter with her hair and threw the robbers inside it. They had caught all the rats in the pack except for one.

Frank jumped over the wooden counter and ran to the back of the bank. He jumped inside the vault and locked the enormous metal door behind him. Blaze followed him and pressed his palms against the vault door. He heated the vault so much, the door turned bright orange and melted away. Whipney reached into the vault with her hair, pulled Frank out, and tossed him into the cage with the others.

The bank hostages leaped to their feet in celebration. They cheered and applauded their rescuers. Everyone was thrilled the Ziblings had saved another day in Big City, USA—everyone but Bolt.

"You're in so much trouble," Blaze told his little brother.

"Why?" Bolt said. "I had everything under control before you showed up."

"You know the rules," Whipney said. "No crime fighting until your homework is done, and Dad doesn't want you doing it without us!"

"I can take care of myself," Bolt said. "I can do anything you guys can, you just never give me the chance! You never let me prove myself!"

"Prove yourself?" said the cage Morph had turned into. "You can't get out of that chair!"

"How are you supposed to help people if you can't even help yourself?" Whipney said.

Tears came to Bolt's eyes and he looked away from his siblings. It was an expression layered with embarrassment, frustration, self-doubt, and heartache all in one. Alex knew that look. She could have sworn she'd seen it somewhere before.

Suddenly, memories surfaced like a movie playing in her mind. Alex flashed back to when she and Conner were in elementary school.

"Let's go around the room and say what we all want to be when we grow up," their second-grade teacher told the class.

"A doctor!" said a boy.

"A senator!" said a girl.

"A teacher!" Alex remembered saying.

Her brother sat up at his desk, excited to share his answer.

"A fireman!" he said. "I want to help people!"

Even then, Conner wasn't as good a student as Alex was. He had trouble learning to read, how to spell, and how to do math. He was always asking Alex for help with his homework and she became mad that he couldn't keep up with her. So when Conner gave his answer about his plans for the future, Alex was inclined to respond.

"A fireman?" she asked. "How are you supposed to help people if you can't help yourself?"

Everyone in the class laughed. Alex didn't mean any harm by it; she was so young, it just slipped out of her mouth. Even though it had happened almost ten years before, the expression on Conner's face had been engraved in her memory forever. It was exactly how Bolt looked at his siblings now.

Soon, the front steps of the bank were filled with police and reporters. Morph transformed back into his human form and he, Whipney, and Blaze pushed the Rat Pack robbers outside and into the hands of the police. The Ziblings spoke with the reporters about what had happened. They took all the credit and soaked up the attention, leaving Bolt tied to the chair inside.

"Now's a good time to sneak into the Zibling Mobile," Conner whispered to Alex.

The twins exited the Big City Bank through the back door and Alex

followed Conner into the alley behind it. The Zibling Mobile was a bright red convertible with rocket engines and a bright yellow *Z* painted on the side. The car was parked out of sight between two dumpsters, but Conner knew exactly where to find it.

He felt around the back tire and pulled a spare key out of a hidden compartment. He opened the trunk and crawled inside it.

"Come on," Conner said, and offered his sister a hand.

Alex hesitated before joining him. Something heavy was weighing on her heart.

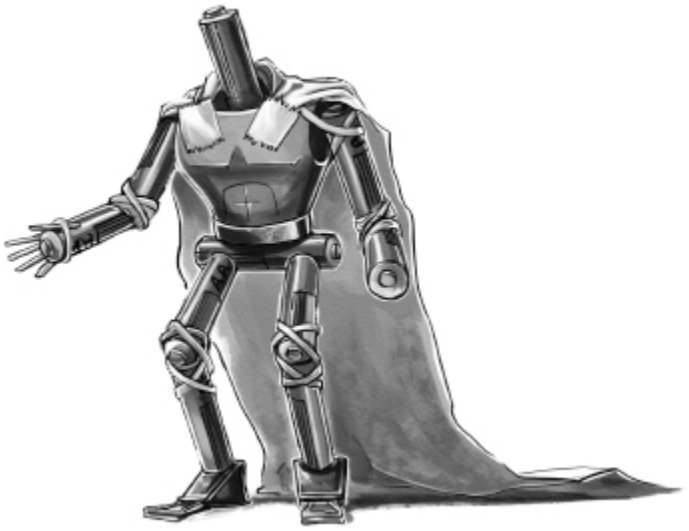
"Quick question," she said. "Is this story based on anything that happened in real life? Anything that might have happened between us?"

Conner thought about it, but shook his head.

"Nope, this one is completely made up," he said. "I just loved superheroes when I was a kid. 'The Ziblings' was one of the first stories I ever wrote."

Alex didn't press the issue further; she just nodded and climbed into the trunk with him.

Conner may have forgotten what happened in the second grade, but Alex couldn't shake it. It wasn't just the mean exchange in elementary school that bothered her, though. Alex was worried "The Ziblings" was much closer to home than Conner realized, and that *she* might be the story's villain.



Chapter Twenty

PROFESSOR WALLET'S SECRET LABORATORY

The Zibling Mobile zoomed through the streets of Big City, USA, tossing Alex and Conner around the trunk like clothes in a washing machine. Every turn was sharper than the one before, every acceleration was more forceful, and the vehicle never slowed down or came to a stop. It had only two speeds: *fast* and *faster*.

"Who the heck is driving this thing?" Alex asked.

"Blaze just got his license," Conner said. "He's a little zealous about it."

The Zibling Mobile ran over speed bumps, causing the twins to slam into the top of the trunk.

"I bet his driving puts more people in danger than all the robbers and criminal masterminds combined!" Alex said.

It was pitch-black in the trunk, so the twins had no clue which street or neighborhood the vehicle was cruising through. Conner was able to track their whereabouts to a certain point, but Blaze's reckless diving was so discombobulating, he didn't even know if they were still headed for Professor Wallet's laboratory.

"How much longer are we going to be in this thing?" Alex asked. "I feel like a scrambled egg."

"The laboratory is deep underground just a few miles outside of the city," Conner said. "At the speed Blaze is driving, it shouldn't take much longer."

"And how exactly do we *get* to the laboratory?" Alex asked. "I'm assuming there's more involved than just surface streets."

"They have to go into the Big City Lake, through the sewer, and down

an abandoned subway tunnel," Conner said.

"Can their car go underwater?" Alex asked.

"Of course their car doesn't go underwater," Conner said. "It turns into a submarine first."

The twins heard a bunch of mechanisms moving throughout the vehicle as it converted into a submarine. Then they heard a big *splash* outside, and a moment later the trunk began filling with water.

"We must be in the lake," Conner said.

"I thought you said the vehicle turns into a submarine!" Alex said.

"Apparently everything but the trunk," he said. "Gosh, I never thought I'd have to be *that* specific!"

Alex snapped her fingers and the water stopped. The Zibling Mobile moved into the sewer, and the twins gagged and covered their noses with their shirts. There wasn't enough magic in the world to keep out the smell.

The Zibling Mobile converted back into a car, and its tires touched solid ground again. The vehicle rattled and shook as it drove over the tracks of the abandoned subway passage. It was so bumpy, the twins became nauseated. Right before they were about to vomit, the car came to an abrupt stop.

They heard the vehicle's doors open and close as the Ziblings got out.

Conner popped the trunk just a crack, and he and Alex peered out.

"We're here," he whispered. "This is Professor Wallet's secret laboratory."

The underground laboratory was built on a former subway platform. The Zibling Mobile was parked on the subway tracks below it and was only one of many methods of transportation. There was a Zibling Jet, a Zibling Speedboat, Zibling Motorcycles, Zibling Segways, and even a Zibling Carriage with robotic horses.

The laboratory had everything a secret superhero base could need. There was a wall of televisions with live news feeds from every major city in the world. There were giant computers, microscopes, test tubes, data servers, and generators. In the center of the laboratory was a big red lightbulb that went off whenever a crisis occurred. All the appliances were neatly labeled in case there was any confusion over what the object was.

Not only was Professor Wallet a devoted astrophysicist, he was also a proud father. The laboratory was decorated with photos of his adopted

children and tokens of their accomplishments. The Ziblings' very first superhero suits were framed and hung on the walls. There was a lit candle with a plaque that read "Blaze's First Flame." A lock of hair and a pair of mangled scissors were on display and tagged "Whipney's First Haircut." There was a photo of a trash can wearing sunglasses marked "Morph's First Transformation." Another photo, of a toddler sucking on a glowing lightbulb like a binky, was labeled "Bolt's First Spark."

There was also a wall covered with a giant map of Big City, USA. The map was bordered with mug shots of all the criminals the Ziblings had brought to justice. Pieces of yarn stretched from the mug shots to the places on the map where the criminals had been caught.

Each Zibling had a corner of the laboratory filled with personal belongings. Blaze had a collection of hot sauces, matches, and fire extinguishers. Whipney had a vanity full of hair products and industrial-strength brushes and combs. Morph had framed butterflies, moths, beetles, wasps, and shelves of photography books—all inspiration for metamorphosis. Bolt had a desk where he made figurines out of old batteries.

Whipney printed out five mug shots of the Rat Pack and placed them on the wall with the others. Blaze went to the computer and dialed a number on the keypad.

"What are you doing?" Bolt asked.

"I'm calling Dad," Blaze said. "He needs to know you left the laboratory without permission—*again*."

"Tattletale!" Bolt said.

A few moments later, Professor Wallet appeared on the computer screen. He was an older man with a gray beard and thick glasses that magnified his blue eyes. He wore a turquoise turtleneck and a white lab coat. The professor held his communication device way too close to his face and the camera was aimed up his nostrils.

"Hello, children," the professor said. "Is this an emergency? I'm just about to step into a meeting with the German chancellor about her new anti-matter research program."

"It's not an emergency, but *someone* snuck out of the laboratory to fight crime on his own again," Blaze said, and nodded at Bolt.

The professor rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "Oh, Bolt," he said

disappointedly. “What am I going to do with you?”

“It’s not fair!” Bolt said. “Blaze, Whipney, and Morph were allowed to fight crime on their own when they were my age!”

“Young man, we’ve been over this a hundred times,” Professor Wallet said. “Your abilities haven’t reached their full potential yet. The radiation from the asteroid reacted differently with each of your DNA, meaning your powers will peak at a different time than your siblings’. Remember, not all flowers bloom in the spring.”

“What if I’m more like a Venus flytrap than a flower?” Bolt argued. “Maybe my powers are just waiting for an opportunity to show up!”

“Science doesn’t work that way,” the professor said. “I don’t make the rules to upset you—I make them to protect you. You’re grounded until I get back home.”

Bolt grunted and stomped his feet. He sulked over to his corner of the laboratory, zapping Blaze on the ear as he went, and then pouted at his desk.

“I’m being summoned into the chancellor’s office,” the professor said. “I’ll call you tonight when I get to my hotel room.”

“Tell the chancellor we said hello,” Morph said.

“And tell her I love the new highlights!” Whipney said.

The professor looked confused. “Of the anti-matter program?” he asked.

Whipney sighed. “No, Dad, in her *hair*,” she said.

“Oh, of course,” the professor said. “I will pass along the message. Good-bye, children.”

The professor hung up and disappeared from the computer screen. The Ziblings went to their respective corners to decompress. Blaze drank a bottle of hot sauce like it was water and did push-ups. Whipney’s hair unbraided and brushed itself while she flipped through a magazine. Morph looked at a photography book and practiced transforming into the objects he saw. Bolt played with his battery figurines and tied a tissue around one to give it a cape.

Conner quietly closed the trunk of the car to have a private word with his sister.

“Here’s my plan,” Conner said. “We’re going to get out and tell them we’re reporters from the *Otherworld Times*, a syndicated school newspaper that runs in twenty-five states. We’ll say we’re looking to do a personal-interest piece on the bravest, strongest, and smartest superhero in the

country. And to prove which one of them deserves the title, we'll take them to the fairy-tale world, where whoever defeats the most soldiers in the Literary Army will be the winner. What do you think?"

Alex definitely saw some flaws in her brother's plan, but she kept them to herself. She was still consumed by guilt from her realization at the bank. She never wanted to discourage her brother again.

"Brilliant!" she said. "That's a great idea—no, it's an *amazing* idea! Gosh, all your ideas are so wonderful. I don't know how you do it."

Even though the trunk was dark, Conner gave his sister a funny look. Something was up. Alex was never *that* supportive. He worried she might have hit her head in the car ride over.

"Alex, are you feeling okay?" he asked.

Before she could answer, the red lightbulb in the center of the laboratory started flashing and a loud siren went off. The Ziblings jumped to their feet like protective canines and ran to the wall of televisions. They scanned the screens and saw a frantic reporter on the French news. Blaze turned up the volume and pressed a button so the reporter's words were translated into English.

"Paris is under attack," the reporter said from the newsroom. *"The mad scientist and criminal mastermind known as the Snake Lord, notorious for his interactions with the Ziblings in Big City, USA, has taken over the Eiffel Tower!"*

The news program played footage of the Snake Lord from earlier that day. He was a tall, muscular middle-aged man with a villainous scowl. His eyes were yellow with narrow pupils like a reptile. He wore a large helmet shaped like the head of a king cobra and a long purple cape. The Snake Lord licked his lips and exposed a forked tongue.

"That slithering son of a gun!" Blaze said.

The Snake Lord was accompanied by two sidekicks, a man and a woman—but neither appeared to be entirely human. They had scaly green skin, large nostrils, and reptilian eyes. The man had an orange Mohawk and a collar like a frilled lizard. The woman had red horns and long nails like the claws of a raptor.

"*Collared Joe* and *Lizzy Liza* are with him!" Whipney said, and raised a lock of hair at the screen.

"He's got more friends than that," Morph said. "Look!"

The three criminals were followed by a long procession of thousands and thousands of serpents. There were boa constrictors, pythons, anacondas, and even tiny garden snakes. The serpents were colorful and moved behind the Snake Lord like a slithering rainbow.

The news showed footage of the Snake Lord and his scaly accomplices storming the base of the Eiffel Tower. They knocked down security guards in their way, and hundreds of tourists ran for their lives. The snakes formed a circle around the Eiffel Tower and didn't let any of the Parisian police pass.

The camera zoomed in on a device the Snake Lord was carrying that looked like a mini-satellite.

"The Snake Lord has the *Reptilalizer*!" Bolt said in horror.

"At this time, the Snake Lord hasn't made any demands and isn't holding any civilians hostage," the reporter said. *"It is a complete mystery as to why he has come to Paris and what he wants with the Eiffel Tower."*

The Ziblings shared fearful looks with one another.

"It isn't a mystery to us!" Blaze said. "We've got to get to Paris and stop him! *Ziblings to the jet!*"

The four superheroes ran straight to the Zibling Jet parked on the subway track.

Conner was more upset by the news than any of the superheroes were. "This is *terrible*," Conner said.

"Hold the phone," Alex said. "The Snake Lord? The Reptilalizer? You never mentioned any of that before we left."

"That's because I forgot how short this story is. It moves much faster than the other ones," he said. "The Snake Lord is the Ziblings' arch-nemesis. He was a scientist who used to work with Professor Wallet. A failed experiment turned him and his research assistants into partial reptiles. When Professor Wallet couldn't reverse the effects, the Snake Lord became evil. He invented a helmet that gave him control over all reptiles. The Reptilalizer is his newest invention, and it turns mammals into reptiles. It has to be activated from the tallest point in a city—that's why he's at the Eiffel Tower!"

"So once he activates it, he'll turn everyone in Paris into a reptile and be able to control them!" Alex said as she figured it out. "That's intense!"

The Ziblings climbed aboard the jet and strapped themselves into the

seats, but Blaze blocked Bolt from entering.

"What do you think you're doing?" Blaze asked.

"I'm going to Paris to fight the Snake Lord with you guys," Bolt said.

"No you're not," Blaze said. "You heard Dad—you're grounded."

"Oh, come on," Bolt argued. "The Snake Lord is the toughest bad guy we've ever fought! You're going to need help!"

"Exactly. Which is why you need to stay in the laboratory," Blaze said. "We'll have our hands full saving the people of Paris—we won't be able to watch you. If you come with us, you'll just be a burden."

Bolt's posture sank almost an entire foot. He had never been called a *burden* before.

"But… but… but I'm a *superhero*," Bolt said with a quivering lip.

Blaze sighed. "No you're not," he said. "You're just a kid with tricks."

Blaze closed the jet's door right in front of Bolt's face and joined Whipney and Morph in the cockpit. The engines roared and the Zibling Jet rocketed down the abandoned subway, heading for Paris.

Bolt waited until his brothers and sister were gone and then burst into tears. He went to his corner of the laboratory and cried at his desk. Once it was out of his system, he tried to make himself feel better by playing with his homemade figurines. He picked up the one with the tissue cape and moved it through the air like it was flying.

"Here he comes now to save the day!" Bolt said, pretending he was a news reporter. "It's the world's favorite Zibling—it's *Bolt*!"

Fantasizing about being a real superhero only made him feel worse. Bolt crumpled up the figurine until it was nothing but a pile of used batteries. He rested his head on his desk and continued crying.

"We need a new plan to recruit the Ziblings," Conner whispered to Alex. "Any ideas? Alex?"

He turned to his sister and saw that the sad little superhero had brought Alex to tears. In fact, she looked sadder than Bolt did.

"Alex, are you okay?" he asked.

"Conner, I'm so sorry." She sniffled.

"Sorry for what?" Conner asked.

"Sorry if I ever made you feel like *that*," Alex cried. "I know you don't remember, but there was a time I treated you exactly like the Ziblings are treating Bolt—and just like them, I had no idea how much I was hurting

you. This story is much more personal than you think. It's about *us*."

"Alex, I think you're over-reacting," he said.

"You just don't see it," Alex said. "Since we were kids, people have always compared us to each other. Everyone always shamed you for not getting good grades like me, for not being as mature as me, or for not being as organized as me. But no one ever made *me* feel bad for not being more like *you*—I had no idea what it was like. But now that I'm watching Bolt, I see how painful it must have been."

At first Conner thought his sister was crazy. There was no way a silly story he wrote could have been *that* meaningful. But the more she explained, the more sense it made. Alex had always been capable of so many things, she was like a superhero in his mind, a superhero he could never live up to.

"I apologize if I ever made you feel bad about yourself or made you feel left behind," Alex said. "You've always been so supportive of me, and I should have returned the favor more often. You're so gifted and deserve a lot more champions than just Mrs. Peters. I'm sorry it took a trip into your stories for me to see that."

Conner had no idea what to say. He looked around at the world of the Ziblings as if he were seeing his own story for the first time.

Chapter Twenty-One

CITY OF LIGHTNING

The Ziblings have arrived in Paris! I repeat, the Ziblings have arrived in Paris!" the French reporter announced. *"Parisians can take a deep breath! It looks like help is here!"*

The twins were still sitting in the trunk of the Zibling Mobile. Conner was trying to come up with a new plan to recruit the superheroes, but all he could think about was his sister's analysis of his story. Was there really more to the Ziblings than he realized?

"So what happens next?" Alex asked.

"The Snake Lord captures the Ziblings at the Eiffel Tower," Conner said. "When Professor Wallet returns to the laboratory, he gives Bolt a pep talk that boosts his confidence. Bolt goes to Paris to save his brothers and sister, and when he faces the Snake Lord, the rest of his powers kick in and he saves the day."

"Oh, Professor Wallet must be based on Mrs. Peters!" Alex said. "She's the person who gave you the confidence to write—and it activated the rest of *your* abilities!"

"Stop analyzing and focus," Conner said. "Professor Wallet doesn't get back to the laboratory for a week. *We* need to boost Bolt's confidence or we'll be stuck here for a couple days."

"Can't you and I just go to Paris and save the Ziblings ourselves?" Alex asked.

"No. The Ziblings are too divided right now," Conner explained. "We need them working as a team if we want them to help us fight the Literary Army. When Bolt saves them, he restores their bond as a family."

"Got it," Alex said. "So how do we make him confident enough to go?"

Conner scratched his head as he thought about it. He peeked out of the

trunk and saw that Bolt was still pouting at his desk.

"He wants nothing more than to be a superhero," Conner said. "So let's make him *feel* like a superhero. We'll still pretend we're student reporters from the *Otherworld Times*, but we'll say we're doing a story all about him."

Alex nodded. "Let's look the part," she said.

She snapped her fingers and a notepad and pen appeared in Conner's hands. Alex snapped again and a camera appeared hanging around her neck. The twins quietly crawled out of the Zibling Mobile, tiptoed across the subway tracks, and climbed onto the platform. Conner knocked on the wall of mug shots like it was a door.

"Excuse me?" he called into the laboratory. "Is this Professor Wallet's secret underground laboratory?"

The voice startled Bolt and he jumped up from his desk. He had never seen strangers in the laboratory before. He eyed the twins suspiciously and made fists with his hands.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked.

"Oh my goodness!" Conner said. "It's the incredible Bolt himself! We must be in the right place!"

"Oh my gosh, I can't believe we're seeing him in person!" Alex said.

The twins acted starstruck. They giddily jumped up and down like they were meeting their idol. Their enthusiasm made Bolt stand a little taller.

"Who are you?" he asked. "How did you find the laboratory?"

"I'm Conner and this is my photographer, Alex," Conner said. "We're from the *Otherworld Times*. Professor Wallet didn't tell you we were coming?"

"No," Bolt said. "What's the *Otherworld Times*?"

"It's a syndicated school newspaper that's printed in over twenty-five states nationwide," Conner explained. "We're here to do a human-interest piece on you. We asked our readers who their favorite Zibling was, and over seventy percent of those polled said it was you. Congratulations!"

Bolt couldn't believe it. His eyes grew wide and his mouth dropped open. He had never been anyone's favorite *anything* before.

"Me?" he said in shock. "But… but… but *why*?"

Conner hadn't thought this part of his plan through yet. He looked to Alex for help.

“Because you’re the Zibling our readers identify with,” she said. “They think it’s very brave of you to fight criminals much bigger and older than you. You inspire young kids around the country to go after their own dreams—despite their size or age!”

Bolt held a hand over the lightning bolt on his chest. He had never been so honored in his life.

“I never thought I was so *inspirational*,” he said.

“Would you mind if we interviewed you and took some pictures?” Conner asked.

“Would I *mind*?” Bolt asked. “Please—I insist!”

The superhero checked his reflection in the computer screen and straightened his hair. He pulled up two chairs for him and Conner to sit in while they chatted. Conner scanned his blank notepad as if it were full of questions. Alex walked around them and took photos while they spoke.

“Now, tell us, what’s it like being a superhero?” Conner asked.

Bolt hesitated to answer. Truthfully, he had never felt more *unlike* a superhero than today. But he didn’t want to disappoint the readers of the *Otherworld Times*, so he gave the answers he thought they’d want to hear.

“It’s the best job in the whole world!” Bolt said. “The asteroid hitting our orphanage was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Conner scribbled down notes so quickly, he wasn’t even writing real words.

“What’s your favorite part about being a hero?” Conner asked.

“Oh, that’s easy,” Bolt said. “Helping people! I love seeing the relief in their eyes after they’re rescued from a burning building, or a runaway train, or a sinking ship. Actually, I’ve never saved anyone myself, but I’ve been with my brothers and sister when they have.”

The thought made Bolt a little sad and he sank in his chair. Conner quickly changed the subject to keep his spirits up.

“Our readers love watching you fly,” he said. “Do you have any special techniques that get you off the ground?”

“Actually, I’m still working on the whole *flying thing*,” Bolt said, like it was a secret. “Hopefully I’ll get better at it one day. Never go so high you’re afraid to look down: That’s my motto.”

“Words to live by,” Conner said. “And what about all that electricity you produce? Where does it come from?”

“According to my dad, my body generates a lot of friction, which pulls the electricity out of the environment around me,” Bolt said. “Right now I can light up a fourteen-watt battery all by myself, but I’m hoping to get to a sixty-watt by the end of the year.”

“That’s *very* impressive!” Conner said. “It makes perfect sense why our readers said they’d prefer having *your* powers over any of your siblings’.”

“Really?” Bolt asked. “That’s crazy because most of the time I wish I could switch! I think it would be so cool to create fire like Blaze, or turn into stuff like Morph, or use my hair for chores like Whipney.”

The more Conner buttered him up, the happier he became. With every picture Alex took, Bolt had a bigger and bigger smile. So far, their plan seemed to be working.

“Nice. This is all such great stuff,” Conner said. “What would you say to someone who wanted to be a superhero as amazing as you?”

It took Bolt a few moments to respond. He had never thought anyone would want to be a superhero like *him*. He wanted to give his followers an answer from his heart.

“I suppose it would be to never give up,” he said. “Courage is what makes a superhero super!”

Suddenly, the red lightbulb in the center of the laboratory lit up and the crisis alarm sounded again. The twins and Bolt turned to the television and saw that the situation in Paris had become much worse.

“Breaking news,” the panicked reporter said. *“The Snake Lord has captured the Ziblings! I repeat, the Snake Lord has captured the Ziblings! Something has gone wrong in their attempt to save the city. There is still no information at this time of what the Snake Lord is doing at the Eiffel Tower or what he is now planning to do with the Ziblings.”*

The news played live footage from a helicopter circling the Eiffel Tower. Blaze, Whipney, and Morph were wrapped around the base of the tower’s antenna by a large anaconda. They were so close together, Blaze couldn’t use his powers without burning his brother and sister. It was so tight between them that Morph couldn’t transform into anything. A rattlesnake was covering Whipney’s head like a turban, constricting her hair.

The Snake Lord was standing on a small platform at the very top of the Eiffel Tower’s antenna. Screw by screw, he attached the Reptilalizer to the antenna and connected it to the tower’s power. He operated unwaveringly

and never looked up from the device.

Bolt was horrified to see that his family had been captured. Even though they'd known it was coming, Alex and Conner pretended to be just as surprised as him.

"This is awful!" he said. "The Snake Lord is going to turn everyone in Paris into a reptile!"

"Good thing there's still *one* Zibling left who can save them," Alex said.

The boy shook his head and paced back and forth. He couldn't fathom facing such a threat without the help of his brothers and sister.

"I can't defeat the Snake Lord on my own!" Bolt said. "My powers haven't reached their full potential yet! I'm no match for him."

"Sure you are," Conner said. "You're the *Otherworld Times*' favorite superhero!"

"No I'm not!" Bolt exclaimed. "Your readers got it wrong. I'm not even a real superhero. My own family said it! I'm just a boy with tricks! The Snake Lord is going to win, and there's nothing I can do about it!"

Bolt went to his corner of the laboratory and sat at his desk. Alex and Conner exchanged worried glances. They had built up his ego only to watch it collapse like a building under demolition.

"I don't think we can convince him," Conner said to his sister. "To be honest, I'm not sure I would go to Paris if I were in his shoes."

"But you *were* in his shoes once," Alex said. "Bolt is you. He represents the little boy inside you who used to doubt himself. You have to be *his* Mrs. Peters—tell him exactly what you would have wanted to hear."

It was unsettling how Alex understood Conner's characters better than he did, but that's how he knew she was right. He let out a deep sigh and walked over to Bolt.

"For what it's worth, I know how you feel," Conner told him. "I used to doubt myself a lot. When people told me I wasn't good enough, I believed them. It's hard not to when you're young."

"Tell me about it," Bolt said. "Does it get better when you're older?"

"It did for me," Conner said.

"How?" Bolt asked.

"Someone else believed in me," Conner said. "All it took was one person's approval and suddenly I believed in myself, too. It gave me a shield to block out all the doubt and negativity. It made me realize I was

just as capable and deserving as the people I compared myself to. But you know what? I was wrong."

"You were?" Bolt asked.

"Totally," Conner said. "I didn't *need* someone else. I had confidence in myself, deep down inside, the whole time. Approval is just a shortcut to self-worth, but sometimes we have to find things out on our own. Sometimes if we want something bad enough, we have to inspire ourselves to get it. Sometimes we have to be our own superhero."

Out of everything Conner said, he could tell this resonated with the boy the most. If he wanted to help people, maybe he had to start with himself.

"But what if I fail?" Bolt asked. "What if the Snake Lord wins and I don't save anyone? Then I'll *never* be a superhero."

"A very wise man once told me that 'courage is what makes a superhero super,'" Conner said. "He never said anything about succeeding."

Bolt looked down at the pile of used batteries on his desk. If the batteries had feelings, he imagined they'd feel the same way he did: useless, crumpled, and empty. But if he could glue junk together and turn it into a hero, he knew he could make a hero out of himself, too. Bolt stood up from his desk and looked Conner in the eye.

"Let's go to Paris," he said. "I've got a family and a city to save."

"Attaboy!" Conner said. He patted Bolt on the back. The contact shocked Conner's hand and he yelped. "Sorry, I forgot who I was talking to."

"How am I supposed to get to Paris in time?" Bolt asked. "My brothers and sister took the jet."

"Luckily for you, Alex and I happen to have a teleportation device," Conner said. "It'll get us there in a matter of seconds."

Alex did a double take. "We *do*?" she asked.

"Yes—*you do*," Conner mouthed at his sister. *"We'll use your magic."*

"Oh, right." Alex played along. "I completely forgot about the *teleportation device*. I have it right here in my hand—it's small and invisible. Boy, it sure is easy to misplace."

Bolt was impressed. "My dad doesn't even have one of those," he said. "How did two school journalists get one?"

"Our school has a great science department," Conner said. "More on that later. Do you want to get to Paris or not?"

Alex put her arms around Bolt and Conner and they formed a group hug. She had never magically transported between locations in one of her brother's stories before. She hoped it would work like it did in the fairy-tale world. Alex closed her eyes and visualized the Ziblings tied to the Eiffel Tower's antenna by the anaconda and also remembered how desperately she and Conner needed the superheroes to defeat the Literary Army.

"Activating the teleportation device," she said. "Here goes nothing."

With a bright flash, the twins and Bolt disappeared from Professor Wallet's secret laboratory. The first thing they felt was a cool night breeze. They looked around and saw lush rectangular lawns, fountains, and a winding river. There were gorgeous buildings for miles around with tall windows, domes, columns, steeples, and French flags. Every building was lit up like the entire city was in the middle of a photo shoot.

"We're definitely in Paris," Alex said. "But I don't see the Eiffel Tower anywhere."

"That's because we're *in* the Eiffel Tower," Conner said. "Check it out!"

After further inspection, she realized they were hundreds of feet in the air. Alex had transported them directly onto the roof of the lower observation deck. The rest of the structure towered above them like the skeleton of a steel giant. It was so tall, the twins got vertigo just looking at it. Despite the circumstances, the Eiffel Tower was a breathtakingly beautiful sight.

On the ground below, they saw the Snake Lord's circle of serpents keeping the Parisian police at bay. Beyond the police were thousands of French citizens observing the scene. A dozen news helicopters flew in the air around the Eiffel Tower and they shined their spotlights on Bolt and the twins as soon as they arrived.

It was a blessing they did, because the spotlights illuminated Collared Joe and Lizzy Liza sneaking up behind them.

"Bolt, look out!" Conner yelled.

Collared Joe leaped toward Bolt and knocked him to the floor. Lizzy Liza stood on her hands and kicked the twins. Alex and Conner rolled across the roof and over the edge. Conner grabbed on to the ledge with one hand and his sister with the other. They swung from the roof like rock climbers without a harness. The observers below gasped and screamed.

As they climbed back over the ledge, Collared Joe and Lizzy Liza

started circling Bolt as he got to his feet. Collared Joe puffed his frilled neck out like an umbrella around his head. Lizzy Liza scraped her claws across the roof and hissed at the boy. They were like predators surrounding their prey.

"What a treat," Collared Joe said. "All four Ziblings in one day! The Snake Lord will be thrilled!"

"I say we keep the little one between us," Lizzy Liza said. "I could use a *Znack,* if you know what I mean."

The overgrown reptiles cocked their heads and laughed. At that moment Alex noticed something on the roof behind Bolt that had the potential to help him, and she hoped he'd get the same idea when he saw it.

"Bolt—behind you!" Alex yelled.

Bolt turned around and saw the bucket of water she was referring to. He ran to it and kicked it over. The water spilled across the roof as Collared Joe and Lizzy Liza charged after him. Bolt put both hands down and sent electric waves through the spill. The evil sidekicks' feet and legs were electrocuted. They hopped around the roof like it was covered in broken glass. They tripped on each other and then fell over the edge of the observation deck and never returned.

The twins crawled back onto the roof and Bolt helped them to their feet.

"Smart thinking, guys," Conner said.

"My dad always says, 'Science is a superpower in itself,'" Bolt said.

With Collared Joe and Lizzy Liza gone, the Snake Lord was the only person preventing them from saving the city. The twins and the youngest Zibling went to the edge of the roof and looked up at the Eiffel Tower's highest observation deck.

"We've got to get up there," Alex said.

"No, it's too dangerous," Bolt said. "You both need to stay here. This is between me and the Snake Lord."

Alex opened her mouth to argue, but Conner gave her a look to keep quiet. As he had explained before, for the Ziblings to reunite, Bolt had to face the Snake Lord alone.

"Good luck, Bolt," Alex said.

"We believe in you," Conner said.

Bolt gave them a nervous salute. He flew into the air and ascended the Eiffel Tower, gliding from steel beam to steel beam like a flying squirrel

jumping from branch to branch. Eventually, he made it all the way to the roof of the highest observation deck, where he saw the other Ziblings at the base of the antenna. Blaze, Whipney, and Morph were shocked and upset to see their little brother.

"Bolt, what the heck are you doing here?" Blaze asked.

"I'm here to save you and the city," Bolt said.

"No, get out of here while you still can!" Whipney said. "You can't face the Snake Lord alone!"

"You need to get Dad!" Morph said. "You can't help us—you aren't strong enough!"

"It doesn't take *strength* to be a superhero," Bolt said. "It just takes *courage*."

Just like Conner, Bolt pretended he had a shield protecting him from all the doubt and belittlement his siblings were sending him. He flew over them to the antenna's ladder and climbed up to the platform where the Snake Lord stood.

The Snake Lord had reached the final step of the Reptilalizer's installation, and a pleased grin stretched across his face. It would only be a matter of time before everyone in Paris was transformed into a reptile, and he would have total control over the world's most cosmopolitan city.

The Snake Lord was distracted by movement coming from beneath his feet. He looked down just as the youngest Zibling was pulling himself onto the platform. The Snake Lord kicked Bolt hard in the chest and he slipped down the ladder.

It knocked the wind out of Bolt, but as soon as he caught his breath, he climbed back up. When he reached the platform, the Snake Lord kicked him down again. But no matter how many times the Snake Lord kicked Bolt down the ladder, the boy was never going to give up. Even if he was kicked down a hundred more times, Bolt was going to do whatever it took to keep the Snake Lord from activating the Reptilalizer.

On the boy's fifth trip up the ladder, the Snake Lord stared down at him pityingly. Bolt's determination amused him. Instead of kicking him down again, the Snake Lord grabbed Bolt by the lightning logo on his suit and looked the boy closely in the eye.

"You're a brave little hero, I'll give you that," the Snake Lord said. "But there's a thin line between *bravery* and *stupidity*—and I'm afraid you just

crossed it."

"And there's a thin line between *bad breath* and *halitosis*," Bolt said. "I'm afraid you crossed *that* a while ago."

The remark angered the Snake Lord to no end, so rather than putting Bolt with his siblings, he threw the boy off the antenna. The youngest Zibling plummeted toward the ground, falling so fast he couldn't fly.

"Bolt!" the Ziblings yelled as they watched helplessly.

He fell past Alex and Conner on the lower observation deck and landed somewhere among the trees below the Eiffel Tower. It was over before the twins even knew what was happening. They looked at each other in total shock.

"This is all my fault," Conner cried. "I pushed him too far. I made him face the Snake Lord when he wasn't ready! *I killed him!* Now the Ziblings will never be united!"

Conner was so ashamed of himself, he buried his face in Alex's shoulder. She felt just as responsible and couldn't find the words to comfort him.

"You murderer!" Blaze yelled at the Snake Lord.

"How could you do that to a child?" Whipney screamed.

"He was just a boy!" Morph shouted.

The Ziblings struggled against the anaconda binding them, but the large snake only tightened its squeeze. The Snake Lord finished the final phase of the Reptilalizer's installation and laughed uproariously to himself.

"The Reptilalizer is complete!" he announced. "Not only have you lost a brother, but once I activate my invention, you'll be the first people in Paris to turn into reptiles! And with no Ziblings left, no one will ever stop me! Soon the whole world will be in my control!"

The Snake Lord flipped the switch on the Reptilalizer and the machine came to life. A thick green gas spewed from the antenna and traveled down the Eiffel Tower like a looming fog. But just before it reached the Ziblings below, the Eiffel Tower's power unexpectedly went out. The Reptilalizer shut off and the green gas dissipated in the night breeze.

"What in the name of Kaa?" the Snake Lord said, and desperately tried to re-start his machine.

As the twins mourned the loss of Bolt, a strange phenomenon occurred in the city around them. Not only did the Eiffel Tower lose its power, but all

the buildings in a ten-block radius blacked out, too. It was like the Reptilalizer had blown Paris's fuse.

"Wait a second," Alex said. "Didn't Bolt say his power comes from absorbing the electricity around him?"

"Yeah, when he was alive," Conner said. "But he's dead—isn't he?"

Suddenly, the twins' hair rose above their heads and their bodies were tickled by a strong wave of friction. They looked down to the trees where Bolt had landed. The trees were buzzing and emitted a glowing bright white light.

Bolt launched from the trees like a missile: He was alive and more powerful than ever. Strong electric waves charged out of his body like he was a human plasma ball. His body was producing so much friction that the air hummed around him. His hair stood straight up above his head and his eyes glowed with energy. Bolt had never looked so confident or capable in his life.

"It worked!" Conner said. *"Bolt's reached his full potential!"*

"Go, Bolt!" Alex yelled.

Conner couldn't have been more proud of the little superhero. Watching Bolt flourish made him feel like a part of him had succeeded and beaten the odds, too. The twins hugged in celebration.

Bolt soared back to the antenna of the Eiffel Tower. He pointed a finger at the anaconda and rattlesnake restraining his siblings and zapped the reptiles with electricity. The snakes curled into balls and fell to the ground. The Ziblings couldn't believe their eyes. It took them a moment to realize that their rescuer was their brother.

"Bolt?" Blaze said.

"You're alive!" Whipney said.

"And POWERFUL!" Morph said.

The youngest Zibling could have gloated, he could have made his brothers and sister feel as lousy as they had made him feel, but none of that was as important as saving the city.

"I have two friends on the roof of the lower observation deck," Bolt said. "Get them to safety and I'll take care of the Snake Lord."

The Ziblings didn't argue with their brother. Blaze jumped off the tower, and fiery blasts erupted from his feet like he was standing on a jetpack. Whipney swung down the Eiffel Tower beam by beam, as if her hair were

the long arms of an orangutan. Morph turned into a huge paper airplane with sunglasses and glided down to the lower observation deck to retrieve the twins.

"Hop on!" Morph told them.

Alex and Conner climbed aboard the paper airplane, and the Ziblings escorted them to the rectangular lawns below. Once they were safely on the ground, the twins and Ziblings all looked up at the Eiffel Tower and anxiously watched as Bolt went head-to-head with the Snake Lord.

At the top of the antenna, the Snake Lord was fidgeting with the wires and gears of the Reptilalizer, but nothing he adjusted made the device regenerate. Bolt landed on the platform behind him with so much force, the entire structure rattled. He raised both hands toward the Reptilalizer and fired it with electricity until it exploded.

If looks could kill, the Snake Lord would have murdered Bolt with his hateful glare.

"You think *you're* powerful?" he asked. "You have no idea what power is!"

The eyes on the Snake Lord's helmet started to glow. As if they were connected by a wireless frequency, he sent instructions to the serpents guarding the base of the Eiffel Tower. The snakes joined their bodies together and formed one monstrous beast. Thousands of snakes made up of hundreds of species were now slithering in perfect synchronicity. The gigantic reptile coiled up the Eiffel Tower toward the antenna to join its master and attack Bolt.

The observing twins, the Ziblings, the police, and the Parisian citizens all screamed. They had never seen such a gargantuan creature take form. Bolt only laughed at the approaching giant. In the Snake Lord's ruthless quest for power, the mad scientist had forgotten one basic scientific fact.

"Science 101," Bolt said. "Nothing helps electricity move faster than metal, and you just sent your entire entourage into a steel structure."

The Snake Lord's yellow reptilian eyes widened and his pupils shrank into narrow slits. He had made a grave mistake. Bolt looked toward the sky above the antenna and sent a wave of friction into the clouds, causing a mighty bolt of lightning to descend and strike the Eiffel Tower.

The lightning illuminated the tower and it shone more brightly than it ever had in history. Every lightbulb on the tower burst, covering it in tiny

explosions. The electricity coursing through the structure electrocuted the Snake Lord and his scaly accomplices until there was nothing left of them but burned dust.

When the lightning had finished, a thunderous roar erupted throughout Paris. The Ziblings, the twins, the police, and all the witnessing Parisians cheered and applauded the little superhero. Bolt flew down to the rectangular lawn and joined the twins.

"Way to go!" Conner said. "I'd hug you, but I'm definitely not touching you after all that!"

"We knew you could do it!" Alex said.

Blaze, Whipney, and Morph sheepishly stepped toward Bolt. They hung their heads shamefully, feeling so guilty they couldn't even look their brother in the eye.

"Bolt, we're so sorry," Blaze said.

"Thank you for saving our lives," Whipney said.

"We should have believed in you," Morph said.

Bolt stared blankly at his brothers and sister, not knowing what to say to them. A sly grin appeared on his face. It felt so good to finally *prove himself* that he didn't care about *proving them wrong*.

"It's okay," he said. "All that matters is that I believed in myself. And I'll definitely find ways for you to make it up to me."

The Ziblings went to speak with the French police and press. Blaze, Whipney, and Morph gave all the credit for saving the city to their little brother. The reporters crowded around him and praised him for his efforts. The Parisians chanted Bolt's name, and Blaze and Morph lifted their brother onto their shoulders so the people could get a better look at him.

Bolt had never smiled so big in his whole life—he was finally a *real* superhero.

"That's so sweet," Alex said. "This is such a great story, Conner."

"Thank you," he said. "You know, I've been thinking a lot about what you said in the trunk of the Zibling Mobile. You were right. 'The Ziblings' is definitely about us."

Alex took a deep breath. "I told you," she said. "And just to reiterate, I want to apologize for anything I might have—"

"But you were wrong about one thing," Conner interrupted. "Blaze, Whipney, and Morph aren't based on you. Alex, you might not realize it,

but *you* were the first person to encourage me to write. *You're* my Professor Wallet, not Mrs. Peters."

"Me?" Alex said. "But… but… *Mrs. Peters*—"

"Mrs. Peters also tried getting me to finish my homework and study for tests, but that never happened," Conner said. "I don't remember the second grade, but I do remember the seventh. Just before we went into the fairy-tale world to fight the Enchantress, I showed you my stories for the first time. You liked them, you said they were special, and *you* gave me the confidence to keep writing. It was *your* approval that inspired me—*you* were my champion."

Alex was more relieved than words could describe. Thinking she had somehow harmed him in the past was the worst feeling in the world. She hugged her brother, squeezing him so tight that he could barely breathe.

Professor Wallet appeared in the crowd of Parisians and pushed his way through the people toward his children. He was so out of breath and sweaty, he looked like he had run all the way from Germany.

"Dad!" Bolt said when he saw him.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner," the professor said. "The chancellor let me borrow her plane. I've been watching the whole thing unfold on the news!"

"I'm sorry I broke the rules again," Bolt said. "I know I was grounded and shouldn't have left the laboratory, but the others were in danger, and I didn't want the Snake Lord to win, so I—"

Professor Wallet silenced his son with a hug. The embrace was slightly electrifying, but the professor didn't care.

"We can talk about the logistics at a different time," Professor Wallet said. "But right now, I couldn't be more proud to be your father. It took a lot of bravery for you to save all these people—bravery you must have found on your own. Paris is known as the City of Light, but after tonight, I believe it'll be remembered as the City of *Lightning*."

It was a touching display, and many of the observers teared up. The reporters tried sticking their microphones closer to the father and son, but the Ziblings pushed them back to give Bolt and the professor some privacy.

"It wasn't all thanks to me," Bolt said. "If it weren't for my new friends, I would never have had the confidence to come here. They taught me how to believe in myself. I couldn't have done it without them."

Bolt led the professor to the rectangular lawn in front of the Eiffel Tower and introduced him to the twins.

“Conner and Alex, meet my dad, Professor Wallet,” he said.

“It’s a pleasure,” the professor said, and shook their hands. “Thank you for giving my son the inspiration he needed to save his brothers and sister. If there is anything we can do to return the favor, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Alex and Conner exchanged quick smiles.

“As a matter of fact,” Conner said. “We *could* use your help with something.…”

Chapter Twenty-Two

A CASTLE OF QUESTIONS

After a long and exhausting journey across the fairy-tale world, Emmerich and the Masked Man arrived in the woods of the Eastern Kingdom. They had only stopped to rest once since leaving the Dwarf Forests, and Emmerich was so tired that he was falling asleep as they walked.

"We're almost there," the Masked Man said. "Keep up, boy."

The closer they got to the portal, the more cross the Masked Man became. Emmerich was starting to realize he wasn't as nice a person as he had first thought. The longer Emmerich accompanied the twins' uncle, the louder a voice in the back of his mind urged him not to trust the man.

They entered an area of the forest that Emmerich recognized. It was the part of the woods he had entered with Conner and Bree on his first trip to the fairy-tale world. He would never forget seeing the Grande Armée soldiers raining down on the trees after they arrived.

"This is it," the Masked Man said. "This is where I saw Morina activate the portal. Now all I need is the magic panpipe. Let me think, which tree did the witch stash it in?"

The twins' uncle searched all the trees in the area. He stuck his hand in every hole, crack, and bird nest in every tree trunk. Finally, he found the instrument in the back of a squirrel's nest.

"Aha!" the Masked Man said with delight. "I found it. Now I just need to play the right tune and the portal will open."

The Masked Man played a series of melodies on the panpipe. He waited a few moments after each one, but none of the notes did the trick. Even when he was certain he had remembered the correct tune, a portal to the Otherworld did not appear.

"Blast that damn witch!" the Masked Man said. "Why isn't it working?"

“Is it the right panpipe?” Emmerich asked.

“Of course it is,” he said. “Morina stole it from the fairies. I watched her open the portal just a few days ago. For whatever reason, it won’t cooperate with me.”

Emmerich thought back to when Conner played the panpipe and opened the portal in Neuschwanstein Castle. He remembered there was something very specific the instrument needed in order to work.

“It needs to be played by a person of magic blood,” Emmerich said. “That must be why it isn’t working. My friend Bree thinks she and I might have magic in our blood. Would you like me to give it a try?”

The magic in the Masked Man’s blood had been taken away a long time ago, so it made sense that the portal wasn’t opening for him. However, if his son was able to do the trick, not only would it grant them entrance to the Otherworld, it would also prove the Masked Man’s plan would work. He glanced down at his son, trying to conceal the eagerness in his eyes.

“Be my guest,” he said, and handed his son the panpipe.

Emmerich licked his lips, held the instrument to his mouth, and blew the eight notes he remembered Conner playing at the castle. Almost instantaneously, a bright light appeared out of thin air among the trees. The light grew bigger and bigger, and it started to spin, sucking all the leaves on the forest floor inside it like a wormhole.

Emmerich smiled. He had activated the portal all by himself! This confirmed Bree’s theory that there was magic in his blood. More than ever, Emmerich couldn’t wait to get home so he could tell her.

Unbeknownst to him, the Masked Man had other plans for the boy. He stared at the portal as it grew, mesmerized by its spinning light. He placed his hand on the back of Emmerich’s neck and pushed his son toward it.

“Good boy,” he said softly. “*Very* good boy…”

Bree and the Sisters Grimm had spent the entire week in Germany searching for clues to Emmerich’s disappearance. Just as they expected, nothing in the Bavarian countryside revealed where the boy was or who had taken him. There was only one place that might give them more insight, and

unfortunately, it wasn't an easy location to get to.

After days of trading voice mail, Cornelia finally got through to the groundskeeper of Neuschwanstein Castle. She told the man she and her family were private investigators from the United States and needed access to the castle. The groundskeeper wouldn't hear a word of it until Cornelia mentioned it was regarding Emmerich Himmelsbach. By now all of Bavaria had heard of the missing boy, and the groundskeeper was inclined to help her.

Late one night, once all the tour guides and tourists had left and the janitors had finished their shifts, the groundskeeper snuck Cornelia, Wanda, Frenda, and Bree inside the castle.

"You have one hour," the groundskeeper said. "I can't give you any more time than that or I might lose my job."

"We really appreciate this," Cornelia said.

"Would you mind showing us around to the lower levels of the castle?" Wanda asked.

The groundskeeper escorted Wanda and Frenda to the stories below, giving Cornelia and Bree a chance to thoroughly inspect the Singers' Hall without supervision. Bree looked around at all the instruments, the pillars, the chandeliers, and the mural of the enchanted forest: She couldn't believe it had been more than a year since she and the boys were there.

"That's where the portal is," Bree said, and nodded to the mural.

Cornelia removed a cross-dimensional emission-tracking device from her purse and waved it around the painting. The device beeped with gusto.

"If I didn't know that before, I would now," Cornelia said. "The detection rates are off the charts. This portal was activated recently—*very* recently."

"I knew it. Emmerich isn't in this world," Bree said. "Whoever kidnapped him took him back to the fairy-tale world."

Bree sat on the floor and sighed. Cornelia kneeled next to her and put the tracking device aside.

"Sadly, I think we've done all we can do," she said. "We should think about heading back to the States tomorrow morning."

Bree would have stayed in Germany for months if she could. She felt like she was abandoning Emmerich by leaving, but Cornelia was right. There was no point in staying if there was nothing they could do.

“Have you contacted the Bailey twins and told them about Emmerich yet?” Cornelia asked.

“I tried calling Conner as soon as I found out Emmerich was taken,” Bree said. “At the time, his mom didn’t even know where he and his sister were. I bet they’re still somewhere in the fairy-tale world.”

“Then perhaps Conner will find Emmerich,” Cornelia said. “The three of you were brought together by chance—we need to have faith it’ll happen again.”

Bree nodded. “Let’s go,” she said. “I don’t want to waste any more of anyone’s time.”

Just as she got to her feet, the tracking device began a beeping frenzy: Something otherworldly was headed their way. A bright light appeared in front of the mural and became brighter and brighter. It grew bigger and bigger, swirling like a vortex.

“My word!” Cornelia gasped. “What’s happening?”

“It’s the portal!” Bree said. “Someone must have activated it from the fairy-tale world!”

Instead of pulling them in like it had before, the portal blew powerful gusts of air into the room, knocking all the furniture and instruments to the floor. Bree and Cornelia held on to each other so they weren’t knocked off their feet. Leaves from the fairy-tale world blew inside the hall, and Bree could make out the silhouettes of two people stepping through the portal. It was so bright she couldn’t tell who they were.

Finally, the portal closed and the swirling vortex disappeared.

“Bree?” said a familiar voice with a German accent.

As soon as her eyes adjusted, Bree saw Emmerich running toward her. She couldn’t believe it—all her prayers had been answered! She embraced her friend and twirled him around in a circle.

“Emmerich!” Bree cried thankfully. “We’ve been looking all over for you!”

“I was kidnapped by witches!” Emmerich said. “They held me prisoner at their camp in the woods until this man rescued me!”

Emmerich gestured to the Masked Man behind him. Even though Bree was overjoyed to see her friend, there was something very peculiar about the man with Emmerich. He seemed familiar, but Bree couldn’t think of who he reminded her of.

“Thank you for saving my friend,” Bree said. “Who are you?”

“He’s Alex and Conner’s uncle Lloyd!” Emmerich exclaimed. “They sent him to find me and bring me home!”

“You know my niece and nephew, too?” the Masked Man asked. “Well, it’s certainly a *small world*.”

From the sarcastic tone in his voice, he was anything but thrilled by the connection.

“We go to the same school,” Bree said. “I didn’t even know they had an uncle.”

“We aren’t close,” the Masked Man said.

Emmerich was so happy to be back home in Germany, he hugged Cornelia before being introduced.

“I’m Emmerich,” he said. “Who are you?”

“My name is Cornelia Grimm,” she said. “It’s so wonderful to see you’re alive and well!”

“Cornelia is my cousin,” Bree said. “When I heard you were missing, she brought me here in her very own plane and helped me look for you. She’s part of a secret group of women called *the Sisters Grimm*—they’re descendants of the Brothers Grimm and they know all about the fairy-tale world.”

Emmerich’s eyes grew wide and he jumped up and down.

“Bree, that reminds me of something I have to tell you!” he said. “I activated the portal from the fairy-tale world all by myself! You were right—there’s magic in our blood! That must mean that you, Cornelia, and I are all related!”

“Actually, Emmerich,” Bree said, “we found out some information while we were visiting with your mom. It turns out you’re not related to the Brothers Grimm like I thought, you’re from the—”

Her train of thought was interrupted when Cornelia suddenly screamed. Bree and Emmerich looked up and saw that the Masked Man was pointing a revolver at them.

“What are you doing, Lloyd?” Emmerich asked.

The Masked Man ignored him. He stepped toward Cornelia and aimed the gun at her. The old woman raised her hands in the air.

“Did the girl say you have a *plane*?” he asked.

“Well… yes,” Cornelia said. “I do.”

The Masked Man jerked his head and gun toward Bree next.

"And you go to school with my niece and nephew," he said. "Do you know where they live and how to get there?"

Bree was scared speechless. *"I... I... I..."* she mumbled.

"JUST ANSWER THE QUESTION!" the Masked Man yelled.

"Yes!" Bree said.

Emmerich was petrified. He regretted not trusting his instincts in the woods. Clearly, the man wasn't who he said he was.

"You're not Alex and Conner's uncle, are you?" he asked.

"Yes, I most certainly *am*," the Masked Man said. "Actually, I'm a lot more than what you realize, but we'll have plenty of time for that later. The four of us are going on a little trip to the twins' house—*right now*!"

"But Alex and Conner aren't there," Bree peeped. "They're in the fairy-tale world!"

The Masked Man chuckled. "Stupid girl," he said. "I never said I was looking for *the twins*."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FAMILIAR STRANGERS

In the commissary, the Blissworm was standing on a table entertaining all the pirates and sailors from "Starboardia." The space worm theatrically re-enacted the twins' encounter with the polycrabs on Lollipopigust. It used sound effects, large gestures, and impersonations to tell the exciting tale. Although it never articulated any words, the *Dolly Llama* crew seemed to understand everything the worm was saying. They *oohed* and *aahed* at the descriptive story; some even covered their eyes like they were watching a scary movie.

"You're telling us that Alex and Conner found you in a hole the polycrabs dug to capture prey?" Winking Wendy asked.

"Then you were all captured and taken to the polycrabs' colony deep underground?" Siren Sue asked.

"And after Conner rescued you from the queen polycrab's web, he detonated a massive bomb that vaporized the whole species?" Stinky-Feet Phoebe asked.

The Blissworm nodded happily. They were a very attentive audience. All the pirates and sailors were astonished by the story. The *Dolly Llama* crew had never heard such an adventurous tale, and *they* were *pirates*.

The commissary was still segregated. The characters from the fairy-tale world glared at the characters from Conner's short stories from their table across the room. They were also astonished, not by the events in the story, but that the *Dolly Llama* crew understood what the worm was saying.

"How do they know what it's talking about?" Jack whispered to Goldilocks.

"They're all from Conner's imagination," Goldilocks said. "They must share some kind of language."

Red casually slid into the seat across the table from Jack and Goldilocks. Her eyebrows were raised and she pursed her lips tightly to keep from smiling: She obviously had a secret she was dying to share. Red leaned over the table so only Jack and Goldilocks could hear her.

"Have you noticed how *familiar* all these strangers are?" Red whispered.

Jack and Goldilocks stared at her blankly. Was she just now realizing that?

"Can't say I have," Jack said. "Have you, Goldie?"

"Familiar?" Goldilocks said. "Whatever do you mean?"

Red was so eager to talk about it, she didn't realize they were being sarcastic. Her eyes enlarged like her theory was scandalous.

"All the characters on *that* side of this odd ballroom are from Conner's short stories, right?" Red said. "But I'm not convinced they're entirely from his imagination. I think many of the people in this room are *based* on people he knows—people like *us*."

Red swiped the table like she was laying out a winning hand of cards. Jack and Goldilocks both sighed. Sometimes Red was so naïve, it was impressive.

"I think you're onto something, Red," Jack said.

"Nothing gets by you," Goldilocks said.

Red was so pleased with herself, she shimmied her shoulders. Captain Auburn Sally walked by their table and Red waved her down.

"Excuse me, lady with the big hat!" Red called. "Come sit with us!"

Red patted the seat next to her. The captain looked around the room to make sure Red wasn't speaking to someone else, and then sat down next to the queen, with no clue of her intentions.

"It's rather silly for us to share such close quarters and not get to know each other," Red said. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Queen Red Riding Hood. These are my subjects Jack and Goldilocks."

Jack and Goldilocks glanced at each other. *Subjects?*

"It's nice to meet you," Auburn Sally said. "I'm Captain Auburn Sally of the *Dolly Llama*."

"Tell me everything," Red said. "Where are you from, what do you do for a living, what are your hobbies, et cetera, et cetera?"

"Well, like I said, I'm the captain of a ship," Auburn Sally said. "We're the only all-female vessel in the Caribbean, but one of the most feared in

the sea. We spend our days sailing across the ocean, looking for buried treasure. Occasionally we'll meet other women like ourselves, on the run from their pasts, and we invite them to join our crew."

Red was so charmed by the captain, she gently placed her hands over Auburn Sally's. The queen smiled like they were long-lost sisters who had finally been reunited.

"You must be *me*," Red said.

Auburn Sally was confused. She understood what Red was insinuating, but the queen didn't seem to notice that *Goldilocks* could have been the captain's identical twin.

"Are you sure?" the captain asked. "No offense, but I would have guessed someone *else* was inspired by you."

The captain gestured to the Cyborg Queen in the corner of the commissary. She was sitting in throne mode as Commander Newters tightened the wires around the gears on top of her head.

"Don't be so humble," Red said. "I'm certain you're me. The similarities are uncanny! Both of our names start with colors, we're both very powerful and accomplished women, and we're both very flamboyant dressers. My style is more *privileged and pampered* but the *dirty-and-daring* look works well on you."

Auburn Sally looked to Jack and Goldilocks for help.

"Just play along or it'll never stop," Goldilocks whispered to the captain. "I think you're right, Red. Auburn Sally is definitely based on you."

"You're practically the same person," Jack said, and nodded over-dramatically.

Red happily turned to the crew of the *Dolly Llama*. She now saw the pirates from a completely different perspective.

"Pardon me for a moment," she said. "I'm going to introduce myself to *our* crew—oh, what fun this has turned into!"

The queen skipped to the table of pirates and sailors and introduced herself. Auburn Sally stared at Red like the queen had just escaped from an asylum.

"She's not sailing with a full set of sails, is she?" the captain asked.

Across the commissary, the twins' mother was happy to see the characters finally warming up to one another. Charlotte took the

intermingling as a sign that she was succeeding as a glorified babysitter. Things had gotten significantly easier now that they were in the hospital. There was plenty of room for all the characters, no one was breaking Charlotte's possessions, and everyone was getting along for the most part. There was only one thing missing to make it an enjoyable experience: Alex and Conner. Spending several hours a day with her son's characters made Charlotte miss Conner more than ever. He had never shared his stories with his mom, so it was nice for her to see them come to life piece by piece.

Charlotte heard a familiar jingle and turned toward the door of the commissary. It swung open and her heart sank into the pit of her stomach—*they had company*!

Dr. Sharon Jackson, a clinical psychologist at Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital, stepped into the commissary with an elderly couple. Sharon was an African American woman with curly black hair who wore several bracelets around each of her wrists that jangled as she walked.

"And *this* is the new storybook commissary," Dr. Jackson told the couple as she escorted them inside.

The psychologist was floored to see that it was filled with so many strange people. The elderly couple cleaned the lenses of their glasses to make sure their eyes weren't deceiving them. All the characters in the room froze and went dead silent—*they had been caught*!

"Hi, Sharon," Charlotte said. "What brings you to the new commissary?"

"Charlotte, meet Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael," Dr. Jackson said. "They're two of the donors who paid for the construction of the new wing. I was just giving them a tour of the facility. *Who are all these people?*"

Charlotte's options were limited. Telling her co-worker the truth was out of the question, and there were very few lies that could explain why so many costumed adults were gathered there. Coming up with something that wouldn't get her and Bob into trouble with the hospital was nearly impossible.

"They're *performers*," Charlotte said. "Bob and I wanted to surprise the patients and the staff with a little entertainment."

The characters were impressed by how convincing Charlotte's lie was, especially one that had been thought of on the spot. Dr. Jackson and the Carmichaels were touched by Charlotte and Bob's generosity.

“Oh, how wonderful!” Mrs. Carmichael said. “They remind me of the circus! When is the performance? We’d love to see it.”

“Tomorrow night,” Charlotte fibbed again. “In the multi-purpose room, at eight o’clock.”

“It’ll be a late night for us, but we’ll be there!” Mr. Carmichael said.

“That is so kind of you, Charlotte,” Dr. Jackson said. “What show are they performing? Is it something I know?”

Charlotte eyed the characters for assistance, but none of them were helpful. They watched the twins’ mother like she was a show herself.

“They’re still figuring it out,” she said. “That’s why everyone is dressed so differently. They’re going to rehearse all the shows in their repertoire for me so I can select one that will be best for the children.”

“We’ll be looking forward to it!” Dr. Jackson said. “May I spread the word, or are you still keeping it under wraps?”

Charlotte laughed. “I guess the cat is out of the bag now,” she said. “Feel free to let everyone know.”

“Sounds terrific!” Dr. Jackson said. “The kids are going to love it! We’ll let you get back to rehearsals.”

Dr. Jackson escorted the Carmichaels out of the commissary. Charlotte faced the characters in a panic. Her face turned bright red, and she was thinking only in swear words.

“Looks like we’re putting on a show,” she said. “Anyone have an idea of what we should do?”

“William Shakyfruit has a collection of hysterical plays, but I don’t think we can pull one of them off by tomorrow night,” Red said.

“Anyone *else* have a suggestion?” Charlotte asked.

Trollbella was the only character to step forward. She went to the center of the room, looked up at the fluorescent lighting, and spread her arms out like she was having a religious experience.

“My time has come,” she said in a trance. “Finally, life has presented me with an opportunity to show my purpose. At last, I have an outlet to combine all my talents for something that matters.”

“You mean, besides being a queen?” Goldilocks asked.

“Governing is just a side gig,” Trollbella said. “My true calling has always been the performing arts. I have the perfect performance for our predicament. It’s the greatest story ever told.”

“‘Little Red Riding Hood’?” Red asked.

“‘THE PRINCE OF THIEVES’?” Robin Hood asked.

“‘Peter Pan’?” Peter asked.

Trollbella raised a finger to silence them. “No,” she said. “‘The Life and Times of Queen Trollbella’!”

The troll queen flicked her hands through the air and mimed falling confetti. The other characters slumped—each thought *their* story was a much better choice.

“We need to start at once!” Trollbella said. “I’ll write, direct, and narrate the performance myself, as nobody knows Trollbella like Trollbella. I’ll need the pirates to build the sets and the Cyborgs to adjust the overhanging fireless torches.”

“Those are called *lights*,” the Cyborg Queen said.

“Now for casting,” Trollbella said. “The Merry Men will be my goblins, the Lost Boys will be my trolls, handsome Jack will be my Butterboy, beautiful Red will play the title character, and fat Goldilocks will be the creature that keeps us apart.”

“I’m pregnant,” Goldilocks said.

Trollbella winked at her. *“Of course you are.”*

“Can I have a bigger role?” Peter Pan asked.

“I have the perfect part for you,” Trollbella said. “No one can portray the highs and lows of life like a boy who can fly! You will symbolize my heart and personify the joy, the conflict, and the agony I’ve experienced in my very short life.”

“Wicked!” Peter Pan said.

Trollbella took charge of the room like a mad conductor, and her eyes widened with power.

“This will be the best surprise performance in the history of Saint Andrew’s Children’s Hospital!” Trollbella declared. “The audience is going to be so invigorated, so inspired, so dumbfounded—it’s a good thing medical professionals will be standing by!”

The characters throughout the commissary were a little frightened by the troll queen. None of them had given her the authority to direct the performance, but none of them were going to take it away from her, either.

“Don’t just sit there like porcelain porcupines—*let’s get to work*!” Trollbella ordered.

Right away, the characters split into the groups she had assigned. Trollbella walked around the commissary and met with each cluster privately to discuss her vision in greater detail.

As they deliberated over the performance, the binder of short stories flipped open and the twins stepped out of the beam of light with Professor Wallet, Blaze, Whipney, Morph, and Bolt. The Zibling characters looked around the commissary in wonder. The other characters were so busy planning the performance, they didn't even look up at the superheroes.

"Welcome to the Otherworld," Alex told the Ziblings.

"Wow!" Bolt said. "A whole other dimension! This is so cool!"

"There's no science to prove this is possible, but I've always said there is too much world for just one planet," Professor Wallet said.

Conner whistled to get the room's attention. "Hey, everybody," he said. "These are our friends the Ziblings—they're superheroes and have agreed to help us fight the Literary Army."

"Can one of you sew?" Trollbella asked.

"I can transform into a sewing machine," Morph said.

"That'll do," Trollbella said. "You'll be in charge of costumes."

The troll queen grabbed Morph's hand and pulled him into her group of set designers.

"Costumes for what?" Alex asked.

"We were caught by one of my co-workers," Charlotte told the twins. "I didn't know what to say, so I told her the characters were performers. The good news is she believed it. The bad news is we have to put together a show for tomorrow night."

"Oh, *Butter-in-law*," Trollbella sang to Charlotte. "Is there a place we can get materials, or can we use the tablecloths and the wood from the walls?"

"Yikes," Alex said. "I'd better get them some supplies before Trollbella tears this place apart."

"I could probably travel into the next story alone if you want to stay here and help," Conner said.

"Are you sure you won't need a hand?" Alex asked.

"Positive," Conner said.

Alex didn't want to desert her brother, but she knew he'd be fine on his own. Charlotte was glad Alex was sitting the next one out because it

presented a wonderful opportunity—one she had been hoping for.

"Conner, I have today and tomorrow off," Charlotte said. "Maybe I could join you in the next one? I would love to travel into one of your stories and see everything you've created."

Having his mom tag along seemed like the worst idea in the world. It was like she wanted to walk him to his classroom when dropping him off at school. He forced himself to smile so he didn't hurt her feelings.

"Oh… *great*," he said through his teeth.

Charlotte could tell her son wasn't thrilled by the idea. "Only if I won't be a burden," she said sadly. "I would hate to interfere. I'm just as happy to stay here and continue watching the characters."

He couldn't tell if she was *intentionally* making him feel guilty or not, but the effect was strong. Obviously it was something Charlotte really wanted to do, and Conner didn't have the heart to tell her no.

"It'll be totally fine," he said. "I'd *love* to have you there."

Charlotte clapped cheerfully. "What's the next story about?" she asked.

"It's called 'The Adventures of Blimp Boy,'" Conner explained. "It's about a young archaeologist in the 1930s who travels across the world on a giant blimp. He searches through ruins and finds precious artifacts before they're stolen by tomb raiders, and then donates them to museums."

"How exciting!" Charlotte said. "Is there anything special we need to do while we're there?"

"We have to find a magical talisman in an ancient pyramid," Conner said. "Whoever possesses the talisman is granted control over a legion of mummified soldiers. Once we bring the mummies here, we'll finally be finished recruiting the army we need to face the literary villains."

"I can't wait!" his mom said. "Let me just find my purse. Alex, if you see Bob, tell him I briefly stepped into another dimension with your brother."

Charlotte searched the commissary for her bag. Alex gazed at Conner with her deepest sympathies.

"Good luck," she said.

Conner sighed and shook his head. "What could be better than an afternoon of *mummies and Mom*?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE ADVENTURES OF BLIMP BOY

Conner poured the Portal Potion on his next story, and he and his mom stepped through the beam of light. Charlotte marveled at the world of handwritten words waiting on the other side. She laughed and gasped as her son's handwriting whirled around them.

"Conner, this is incredible!" she said. "Where are all the characters?"

"Mom, we're not in the story yet," he said. "This is just the area that creates the story around us—it's like the Portal Potion's lobby. 'The Adventures of Blimp Boy' starts in India. You'll know we're there when you see a jungle."

"How fun!" Charlotte said. "I've never been to a jungle before."

She watched in wonder as the words *jungle trees*, *temple ruins*, and *screeching monkeys* stretched and filled the empty space around them. Word by word, a tropical Indian wilderness was created before their eyes. There were thousands of thick trees with large, drooping leaves and vines. It was very warm and so humid that their clothes stuck to their bodies. Playful monkeys growled and shrieked as they climbed through the tree branches above. Over the treetops, Conner and Charlotte could see the spiraling towers of an ancient temple in the distance.

"This is it," Conner told his mom.

Charlotte dug through her purse and pulled out a bottle of lotion. She rubbed it on her face and arms and then handed it to her son.

"What's that?" Conner asked.

"It's insect repellent with SPF," Charlotte said. "I don't want us getting sunburned or bitten while we're in the jungle."

Conner could already tell this was going to be a long trip. He rubbed the repellent on his skin and handed it back to his mom. Charlotte walked around the jungle like she was inspecting a house for sale.

"Well, it's *nice*," she said. "There are lots of plants and interesting animals to watch, but that heat really gets to you, doesn't it?"

"Don't worry, we won't be here very long," Conner said. "The lead character should be running by any minute now."

They heard a rustling in the jungle as someone ran toward them from the temple. A few moments later, a fourteen-year-old boy appeared. He came to a halt when he saw Conner and Charlotte. They were the last things he had expected to see in the jungle.

The boy wore an aviator hat with goggles and flaps over his ears, a fitted brown leather jacket, khaki pants, and tall boots. His face was bright red and he panted from running. He held a golden relic shaped like a human hand tightly under his arm. The boy looked like he could have been Conner's little brother.

"Who are you?" he asked them.

Charlotte shook his hand excitedly. "Hi there," she said. "I'm Conner's mom, Charlotte. It's very nice to meet you!"

The boy stared at her strangely: Was he supposed to know her son? Conner sighed and slapped his palm against his forehead.

"Mom, he doesn't know who we are yet," he whispered to her. *"We have to act like this is the first time we're meeting him."*

"My apologies," Charlotte whispered back. *"I'll let you do all the talking."*

Conner turned toward the boy and tried to smooth things over.

"Forgive my mom," Conner said. "She's a little delirious. We got separated from our tour guide and have been lost in the jungle for days! It's so good to see another human being. What's your name?"

"I'm Beau Rogers," the boy said.

A series of thunderous growls came from the jungle behind him. Beau glanced back and gulped nervously. Although they couldn't see what was coming, they could hear a group of animals rushing through the trees toward them.

"We're all about to become *lunch* if we don't get out of here," Beau said. "Follow me if you value your life!"

Beau sprinted into the trees and gestured for Conner and Charlotte to come with him. Conner ran after him, but when he turned around he saw his mom hadn't moved. She was standing in the same spot, stretching her feet and legs.

"Mom! We've got to go!" Conner yelled.

"I know, I heard him," she said. "But I'll really regret it if I don't stretch before running. You'll know what I'm talking about when you get to be my age. Okay, now I'm ready."

Another roar sounded through the jungle. Conner and Charlotte could see that the commotion was coming from a pack of tigers running straight toward them. Charlotte screamed and ran after Beau faster than Conner had ever seen her move before. He followed but could barely keep up with her.

"I never knew you ran so fast!" Conner said.

"I ran track in college," Charlotte said. "Those are *real tigers* chasing us! What are *real tigers* doing in your story?"

"What were you expecting? Puppets?" Conner asked.

"I guess I was expecting everything to be more innocent, like a school project!" she yelled. "I didn't think I'd be running for my life!"

Conner and Charlotte caught up with Beau, but as they gained distance, the tigers did, too. They got closer by the second, and it wasn't long before they were close enough to swipe at them. Whenever a tiger got too close, Charlotte smacked it in the nose with her purse.

To add to their troubles, Beau was leading Conner and Charlotte right to the edge of a cliff. The tigers started slowing down, assuming their prey had nowhere to go. Beau didn't seem discouraged at all by the cliff, though; in fact, it made him run even faster.

"We're almost there!" Beau said.

"Almost *where*?" Charlotte said. "We're trapped between *death* and *death*!"

"Mom, Beau knows what he's doing!" Conner said. "When we get to the cliff we have to jump!"

"WHAT?" Charlotte yelled.

"You have to trust me or you'll be cat food!" Conner said.

Charlotte ignored every instinct to slow down and continued running with the boys.

Right when they reached the cliff, a massive blimp rose above the edge

like a sunrise. The blimp was bright white like an oval cloud, and a long silver gondola with several round windows stretched under its belly. An old woman aboard the blimp slid its wide door open just in the nick of time, and Beau, Conner, and Charlotte jumped over the cliff and landed inside. They collapsed on the blimp's floor and stayed in a dog pile until they caught their breath.

The tigers on the ground dropped their jaws in unison. They had never seen their lunch float away in a giant balloon before.

"Time to diet, you overgrown felines!" the old woman yelled at the tigers below, and she slammed the door shut with gusto.

The old woman wore pearls, high heels, and a fur coat, with goggles and an aviator hat just like Beau's. She had a familiar raspy voice and saucy attitude. It only took Charlotte a couple of seconds to realize the old woman was based on Mother Goose.

"That was closer than the run-in I had with Bonnie and Clyde," the old woman said. "I see you picked up some friends, Beau."

"I wasn't expecting the temple to be filled with tigers!" Beau said. "Why are ancient ruins always filled with giant predators? Just once I'd like to walk into a tomb and find a flock of sheep."

"I wasn't talking about the cats," the old woman said.

"Oh, obviously," Beau said. "Aunt Emgee, this is Conner and his mother, Charlotte. I found them in the jungle right after I left the temple. Apparently they got separated from their tour guide and have been lost in the jungle for a couple of days."

Emgee eyed Conner and Charlotte over her goggles. "You look awfully cleaned-up for being lost in the jungle," she said.

"My mom's really into personal hygiene," Conner said.

"I'm a nurse," Charlotte said with a shrug.

Emgee was pleased to hear it. "I always love meeting a fellow working woman," she said. "Welcome aboard the *Charlie Chaplin*!"

The old woman helped Beau, Conner, and Charlotte to their feet and shook their hands.

"Did you name the blimp after the actor?" Charlotte asked.

"Actually, he named himself after the blimp," Beau said. "He's Emgee's ex-boyfriend."

Emgee twirled her pearls and blushed. "Oh, no, he was just a *fling*," she

said. “Poor kid fell madly in love with me, but I was too old for him and had already vowed not to date any more actors. Speaking of ancient history, did you get the relic, Beau?”

Her grand-nephew held up the golden hand. “Presenting the fourth and final Golden Hand of Shiva!” he said happily.

“Way to go, kiddo!” Emgee said. “You’ve collected them all! The Delhi Museum will be ecstatic!”

Beau placed the golden hand on a shelf with three identical relics. Conner and Charlotte looked around the blimp with wide eyes. There were shelves and cases filled with artifacts, statues, tools, coins, and jewelry from ancient ruins around the world. All the walls in the *Charlie Chaplin* were covered in maps of various places with pins indicating where Beau and Emgee had traveled.

Conner knew where each and every artifact came from and the different adventures Beau had had collecting them. The only one he didn’t recognize was a small doll made of rope. Beau slapped his hand as he reached for it.

“Don’t touch that—*it’s cursed*,” Beau warned him.

Conner nodded. He remembered it now. Charlotte looked around the blimp at all of Beau and Emgee’s belongings. She couldn’t believe her son had created a world with such unique details and original characters.

“You’ve collected all of these?” Charlotte asked.

“Not *us*—it’s all *him*,” Emgee said, and patted her grand-nephew on the back. “Beau is the youngest archaeologist in the world. He earned his doctorate when he was just twelve years old!”

“It was actually my second,” Beau clarified. “I got my first doctorate in political science when I was ten, but that was before I realized archaeology was my passion.”

“That’s extraordinary,” Charlotte said. “I’m sure your parents are very proud!”

Beau lowered his head sadly. “Actually, my parents died when I was five,” he said. “My mom was a flapper and my dad was a musician. They were performing at an underground nightclub when the building above it collapsed from all the barrels of gin the owner was hiding in the attic.”

“Prohibition.” Emgee groaned. “It took away so much joy from so many people. I’ve been caring for the little rascal ever since. I’ve supported him through every step of his archaeology ambitions. A lot of my friends

thought I was crazy when I sold my brownstone and bought a blimp to travel the world, but if you ask me, it was a great investment. Everyone's crazy about *planes* these days, but I think blimps will be the transportation of the future."

"We've had some good times aboard the *Charlie Chaplin*," Beau said. "We've gone on so many adventures, seen so many astonishing places, and met so many interesting people. Speaking of which, where are you guys headed? Is there a place we could drop you off at?"

With just a look, Conner reminded his mom to let him do all the talking.

"The rest of our group headed to Egypt," he said. "You wouldn't by chance be headed in that direction, would you?"

Emgee was so tickled by the coincidence, she slapped her knee.

"You're in luck!" Emgee said. "We're headed to the Ancient Pyramid of Anesthesia right now! Beau's got his heart set on a mythical talisman."

Charlotte was confused. *"Anesthesia?"* she whispered to her son.

"I heard you and Bob talking about it once and thought it sounded like an ancient pyramid," Conner whispered back. "Tell us more about this talisman. It sounds super-neat!"

Beau was more than excited to talk about it. He retrieved a rolled-up map from a stack in the corner and spread it over the table in the center of the gondola. The map was of southeast Egypt and showed a giant pyramid located near the Nile a few miles south of Cairo. Beau yanked an illustration of a talisman off the wall and placed it on top of the map. The talisman was a gold medal with several Egyptian hieroglyphics carved into it.

"The Lost Talisman of Pharaoh Eczema," Beau said theatrically. "According to legend, the pharaoh was so beloved by his people, they presented him with a golden talisman. Unfortunately, the token of appreciation made the gods jealous. When the pharaoh grew old and became ill, he was afraid the gods would punish him unfairly in the Underworld. So at the time of Eczema's death, one thousand of his most devoted soldiers were killed, mummified, and buried with him in the pyramid so he wouldn't enter the Underworld alone. The gods were furious and denied the soldiers entrance to the Underworld, forcing them to roam the pyramid as the undead. Since they can't protect the pharaoh in the Underworld, the soldiers devotedly protect his remains in the pyramid."

“Wow,” Charlotte said, and glanced at Conner. “That’s unsettling.”

“But wait, there’s more!” Beau said. “The legend also states that Pharaoh Eczema’s soul bestowed mythical powers on the talisman. Whoever wears it has complete control over the mummified soldiers in his pyramid. The pharaoh was buried with the talisman in a golden chamber deep in the Pyramid of Anesthesia. The chamber is surrounded by a maze, and the pharaoh’s casket is patrolled by his most treasured and loyal guardian.”

“Conner, that sounds *just* like the talisman you wanted to collect,” Charlotte said. “Is it the same or is there more than one?”

The horrified gaze Conner sent his mother was the exact expression Beau sent him. Once again, Conner slapped his palm against his forehead, and Charlotte knew she had made a mistake by sharing their plan.

“*You’re* after the talisman, too?” Beau asked.

“Um… kind of,” Conner said. “I happen to dabble in archaeology as well. My mom and I are planning to find the talisman and donate it to… um… the Not-So-Natural History Museum in Cairo.”

“Well, you can forget about it!” Beau yelled. “The talisman is mine! It’s one of the reasons I went into archaeology! Emgee, open the door—let’s kick these tomb raiders off the *Charlie Chaplin*! I should never have saved you in the jungle!”

“Easy, Beau,” Emgee said. “Technically the talisman doesn’t belong to either of you. It belongs to Pharaoh Itchy, or whatever his name is. Seems only fair to get you both to the pyramid and let you duke it out the old-fashioned way.”

Beau nodded. “You’re right, Aunt Emgee,” he said. “We’ll fight to the death!”

Emgee sighed. “No, Beau,” she said. “I meant you’ll have to *race* for it.”

“That seems reasonable,” Charlotte said. “We can even set a starting mark so it’s completely fair.”

Conner quickly pulled his mother aside. “Mom, stop agreeing! You know I need the talisman to recruit the mummies into our army!”

“If my son is going to become a warlord, he’s going to come by it honestly! Besides, I am not letting you go inside that pyramid alone now that I know it’s filled with zombie mummies!” Charlotte snapped. “How

much longer until we reach the Pyramid of Anesthesia?"

"It'll take all night, but we'll get there by morning," Emgee said.

"Then it's settled," Charlotte said. "Tomorrow you can both go into the pyramid together, and whoever finds the talisman first can keep it."

Neither of the boys was happy about having to race for the talisman. Conner never pictured a scenario where the hero of his story would turn into his competition. He had created the Pyramid of Anesthesia, so hopefully it wouldn't be too hard to navigate it, but he had also written Beau to be the best archaeologist in the world. It wasn't going to be an easy race.

Emgee shifted the gears of the *Charlie Chaplin*, and the blimp sailed into the western sky.

"Anesthesia or bust!" the old woman said.

After a long evening of reminiscing, Emgee convinced Charlotte and Conner she had single-handedly put the *roaring* in the Roaring Twenties. While she sipped from a jug of homemade potato gin, she told them all about her five failed marriages, her many connections to organized crime, and her early days of performing on a burlesque circuit.

Even though Beau had found a reason to resent their guests, Emgee loved having an audience besides her grand-nephew.

Beau spent the whole evening looking over his map of the pyramid and the illustration of the talisman. He only glanced up to glare spitefully at his new opponent. Conner became so tired of the hateful looks, he moved his seat so his back faced the archaeologist.

At night, Emgee pulled out some guest cots and set them up for Charlotte and Conner to sleep on. She tied down the gears of the *Charlie Chaplin* so it would continue floating west while they slept, and then she and Beau retired to their rooms in the back of the gondola.

Spending the night on a blimp was anything but restful. The sudden bursts of elevation and unexpected turbulence made it very difficult for Conner and his mom to stay asleep. However, Charlotte was kept awake by much more than the bumpy ride. Something had been eating at her since

she learned about Beau's parents, something she was desperate to get out.

"Conner, are you awake?" she asked.

"I haven't been able to sleep since that sudden dip over Persia," he said.

"Well, I just wanted to tell you how proud I am of you, honey," Charlotte said. "I'm really amazed by everything you've created, not just in 'The Adventures of Blimp Boy' but in all of your stories. Why have you never shared them with me before now?"

"I guess I just never wanted to bother you," he said. "I first started writing shortly after Dad died. You were always so busy with work and taking care of us, I never wanted to put one more thing on your plate."

Unknowingly, Conner had just answered a difficult question she had been meaning to ask him.

"I suppose that's why there aren't any mothers in your stories," Charlotte said. "Your writing represents so many facets of your life, and I spent so much time away from you, I can't expect any representation of me in your writing. You know, I think one of the reasons I'm so afraid you and your sister are missing out on your lives is because *I've* missed out on so much of your lives. I'm sorry there have been so many times you felt like you didn't have a mom. It's never the kind of mom I wanted to be—life just had other plans."

This was as heartbreaking for him to hear as it was for Charlotte to confess. "The Ziblings" was the first story that made Conner realize just how meaningful each character in his writing could be; he never thought the *lack* of a character could be so symbolic, too. But even though there were no mothers in his stories, it didn't mean Charlotte was missing from them. She didn't see the stories like Conner did.

"Mom, you've got it all wrong," Conner said. "You're in my stories a bunch, you just don't realize it. Auburn Sally is based on more people than just Goldilocks. There's a reason I made her hair the same color as yours. After Dad died, you sailed through all the hard times so bravely; it reminded me of a pirate sailing through a storm. You were the real inspiration behind 'Starboardia.' Jack and Goldilocks just helped me add some layers to it."

"Really?" Charlotte asked. "You're not just saying that?"

"You'd know if I was lying to you—you always do," Conner said. "That's not all, though! Every day when you went to work and took back-

to-back shifts just so we could get by, I always thought you must have had superpowers to get through it. That's why I made Bolt's superhero suit the same color as your nursing scrubs. You might have been gone a lot, but you were still a superhero to me and Alex."

Charlotte was moved to tears. She leaned over Conner's cot and kissed him on the cheek.

"I love you so much, sweetheart," she said. "And from now on, I want to be the very first person you share your stories with."

"The next one'll go straight off the presses and into your hands," he said. "I promise."

Charlotte's heart gave a sigh of relief. Knowing she wasn't missing from her son's imagination felt like a weight had been lifted off her chest. And Conner rarely got to reassure his mom about anything, so he was happy he could put her mind at ease. They both finally drifted off to sleep as the blimp drifted over Arabia.

The following morning, Conner and Charlotte awoke as the sun rose and shined through the *Charlie Chaplin*'s round windows. It felt even hotter than it had in the jungle in India. When Conner looked out the window, he saw they were floating above an endless sandy desert. He could barely see the tip of a triangle peeking out on the horizon.

"The Pyramid of Anesthesia!" Conner shouted. "We're almost there!"

His excited declarations woke up Emgee and Beau. They hurried out of their rooms dressed in pajamas and joined Conner at the window. Emgee couldn't see until she strapped on her goggles and used them like prescription glasses.

"That's the pyramid, all right!" she said. "Personally, I would have built my own pyramid closer to a beach, but to each their own."

Less than an hour later, Emgee was piloting the *Charlie Chaplin* toward the sandy earth beside the pyramid. The landing alone was enough evidence for why blimps never became the transportation of the future as Emgee had predicted. The bottom of the gondola bumped across the sand over a dozen times before the blimp came to a stop. Each contact made the whole

gondola rattle, and things toppled overboard.

Once they landed, the boys got ready for the race to the talisman. Beau fastened the straps of his aviator hat, laced his boots, and zipped up his leather jacket. Conner tied his sneakers, applied sunblock, and put his backpack over his shoulders. Conner tried offering Beau a friendly handshake before they started, but Beau wouldn't even look at him.

Outside the blimp, Emgee drew a line in the sand and made Conner and Beau stand behind it. The old woman raised a revolver in the air, careful not to aim it at the *Charlie Chaplin*.

"I want a good, clean race," Emgee said. "No cheating, no sabotage, and no swearing! May the best archaeologist win!"

"Good luck, honey!" Charlotte said. "Please watch where you're going—pyramids are dark and dusty."

Emgee fired the revolver and Beau and Conner charged toward the Pyramid of Anesthesia. The thick sand was almost impossible to run in. But even wearing tall boots and a leather jacket in the desert heat, Beau was much faster than Conner. Once Beau was in front of Conner, he purposely kicked the sand backward, aiming for Conner's eyes.

"Hey!" Conner said. "That's cheating!"

"Eat my dust!" Beau said.

The boys reached the base of the Pyramid of Anesthesia. Beau immediately ran up the north side like the pyramid was a wide stone staircase. Conner knew the entrance was on the south side of the pyramid, so he ran around it. Beau noticed Conner going in a different direction, so he followed him from higher ground. They arrived at the entrance on the south side of the pyramid at the same time.

"How did you know where the entrance was?" Beau asked him.

"Because I made it," Conner said truthfully in a sarcastic tone, so Beau was none the wiser.

The young archaeologist kicked the entrance open and a gust of sandy air almost knocked the boys down the pyramid. The entrance led to a long, dark, and dusty hall. The walls were hung with a row of unlit torches and were engraved with hieroglyphics from floor to ceiling. Cobwebs draped across the hall like torn curtains. Clearly there hadn't been another person in the pyramid for thousands of years.

Beau took a torch off the wall and pulled a matchbox out of his pocket.

He struck a match using the zipper of his jacket and lit the torch. Conner removed the flashlight from his backpack and hit it against the wall until the batteries worked. The boys ran down the hall, venturing farther into the pyramid.

The hall was just the beginning of a multi-dimensional maze that zigzagged through the pyramid. As soon as the maze split into different directions, Beau purposefully chose the path opposite from Conner, hoping it would get him to the pharaoh's chamber faster. Conner just rolled his eyes and took the route he knew would get him there quickly.

After a mile of winding narrow passages, steep staircases, and sharp turns, Conner stepped into an enormous room at the very bottom of the pyramid. The walls were covered with layers and layers of tombs like novels stacked on a giant's bookshelf. The crypts contained the mummified corpses of the pharaoh's soldiers. The room marked the halfway point of the pyramid's maze, which continued on the other side.

Beau entered the room several moments after Conner. He was red-faced and winded. Obviously the archaeologist was having a rougher time navigating the maze than Conner was. Beau looked around in astonishment. He had never seen so many tombs in one place.

"What is *this*?" Beau asked.

"This is the pharaoh's army," Conner said.

Beau saw where the maze continued on the other side and dashed toward it, hoping to get a head start on Conner.

"No, Beau! Wait!" Conner yelled after him.

"Nice try, but I'm not falling for—"

Beau suddenly tripped on a rope that was so thin he couldn't see it. The rope snapped, and two enormous metal gongs fell from the ceiling and crashed to the floor on either side of him. The noise was deafening and the boys covered their ears before it damaged their eardrums.

"That's loud enough to wake the dead!" Beau said.

"That's the whole point!" Conner said.

All the crypts began shaking at once. One by one, the lids were pushed off and the pharaoh's mummified soldiers slowly crawled out of their tombs. They moaned and groaned in agony and crept toward Conner and Beau.

"Mummies!" Beau yelled. *"So the legend is true! It's all true!"*

Beau and Conner continued into the second half of the maze and the mummies chased after them. Once again, Beau took an alternative route from Conner on purpose.

Conner knew the second part of the maze even better than he knew the first. He had no hesitation whatsoever as he snaked through hall after hall, climbing higher and higher into the pyramid. Each level he reached became smaller and smaller the closer he got to the top of the pyramid. Soon he came to a pair of golden double doors with the hieroglyph of a phoenix carved into them.

"I did it!" Conner said proudly. "I made it to the pharaoh's chamber!"

His victory was cut short by a blood-chilling scream coming from the maze behind him. It was followed by a clamor of monstrous wails and growls. It sounded like the mummies had caught up with Beau.

"Help!" Beau screamed. *"Help me!"*

Conner was conflicted about what to do next. He was only a few short steps away from retrieving the talisman, the only thing he needed to complete his army and save his friends in the fairy-tale world. For a split second, Conner thought Beau deserved to be attacked by mummies for the way he had acted. However, Conner knew his mom would be upset if only one of them came back alive. So to avoid a potential guilt trip (and because it was the right thing to do), Conner turned around and went to save the archaeologist.

"Stupid conscience," Conner mumbled to himself. "It never knows when to quit."

He followed the screams through the maze as he carefully took note of the route to get back to the pharaoh's chamber. Conner found Beau in a corner of the maze surrounded by eight mummies. He was on the floor, and the mummies were viciously hitting and kicking him.

"Hey!" Conner said. "Toilet-paper heads! Over here!"

The mummies turned to Conner and crept toward him. He shined his flashlight directly in their eyes, temporarily blinding them. The mummies scattered like roaches, and Conner helped Beau to his feet.

"You saved my life!" Beau said in shock.

"I *gave* you life," Conner said under his breath.

"I wasn't expecting you to come back for me, especially after how I treated you," Beau said. "Thank you!"

“You can thank me later,” Conner said. “I found the pharaoh’s chambers. Follow me! There are a lot more mummies where these guys came from!”

Conner quickly retraced his steps through the maze to the highest point in the pyramid where the pharaoh’s chamber was located. Beau was amazed by how effortlessly he was moving through the pyramid. Finally, the boys arrived at the golden doors with the phoenix, and Conner grabbed the handles to push them open.

“Wait,” Beau said. “Remember, the pharaoh’s chamber is patrolled by his most treasured and loyal guardian. It might take both of us to defeat it.”

Conner let out a light laugh. “Yeah…” he said. “I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you.”

He pushed open the doors and the boys stepped into Pharaoh Eczema’s chamber. Unlike the rest of the pyramid, the chamber was spotless. The walls were made of pure gold and the pharaoh’s colorful casket rested on a platform in the center of the room. They knew they were at the top of the pyramid because the high ceiling rose to a peak above them. There was a small opening in the ceiling that allowed a ray of sunlight to shine directly on the casket.

Beau eyed the chamber nervously: Something was missing. “Where’s the pharaoh’s most treasured and loyal guardian?” he asked.

The boys heard high-pitched barking. Peeking around the casket on the floor was a small mummified dog. Although it barked at Conner and Beau, it was clearly more frightened of them than they were of it.

“It’s a *dog*?” Beau asked.

“I don’t know anything more treasured and loyal than someone’s dog,” Conner said.

Conner held out his hand, and the dog slowly approached it and sniffed around it. There was something familiar about Conner, and the mummified dog became excited when he sensed it. He happily ran around Conner’s feet and rolled on his back, allowing him to rub the wraps covering his belly.

“Good boy, Bones,” Conner called. “Who’s a nice three-thousand-year-old pup, huh?”

“You know the dog’s name?” Beau asked him suspiciously.

“Um… yeah,” Conner said. “I must have read it somewhere.”

They heard stomping echo through the maze outside the chamber. Conner and Beau turned and saw hundreds and hundreds of mummies

creeping toward them.

"We've got to get to the talisman!" Conner said. "Those mummies are about to take out millenniums' worth of pent-up aggression on us!"

The boys hustled to the casket and tried sliding the lid off. It was incredibly heavy and they had to use all their strength. Just as the mummies entered the chamber, Conner and Beau knocked the lid over and saw the golden talisman around the neck of the mummified pharaoh. It grossed him out to touch a dead body, but Conner pulled the talisman off the corpse and put it over his own neck.

"Knock it off!" Conner yelled at the approaching mummies.

Now that Conner had complete control over them, all the mummified soldiers froze and attentively put their hands at their sides. Beau looked at the talisman around Conner's neck and became very depressed. The young archaeologist had spent most of his life dreaming about the day he'd find it, only to see it in someone else's possession. He looked so pathetic, Conner couldn't help feeling sorry for him.

"Look, I only need the talisman for a little while," he said. "I'm going to use the mummies to help out some friends. When I'm done, you can have it."

Beau was overjoyed to hear this. "Really?" he asked.

"Totally," Conner said. "Besides, it won't be worth much where I'm from."

The archaeologist squinted at Conner. He had been trying to figure out how Conner knew so much about the pyramid and had finally come to the only probable conclusion he could think of.

"You're Pharaoh Eczema reincarnated, aren't you?" Beau asked. "That's how you knew where the entrance was, how you moved so quickly through the maze, and how you knew the name of his dog."

"It's way more complicated than that," Conner said. "I'm not sure you'd even believe me."

"Try me," Beau said. "I'm an archaeologist—I *live* for complication."

Conner sighed. After their race through the pyramid, he was too tired to come up with any more lies.

"Okay, fine," Conner said with a shrug. "But before I explain, let me ask you this: How familiar are you with classic fairy tales?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

“THE LIFE AND TIMES OF QUEEN TROLLBELLA”

Written and Directed by Trollbella

Dr. Sharon Jackson had been the resident clinical psychologist at Saint Andrew’s Children’s Hospital for over two decades, and today she was facing the most difficult patients of her career. Four stubborn teenage girls sat across from her with their arms folded. They each wore the same hospital gown and the same defiant expression. Unbeknownst to the girls, their worried parents were watching them through the mirror on the wall.

“Hello, ladies,” Dr. Jackson said. “My name is Dr. Sharon Jackson and I’m a psychologist here at Saint Andrew’s. I’ve been asked to have a word with you. How are you all feeling today?”

“Don’t answer any of her questions,” Mindy told her fellow Book Huggers. “The less we say, the less they can use against us.”

“I promise you, we are only trying to take care of you,” Dr. Jackson said. “Do you remember why you were brought to the hospital?”

Cindy tilted her head in suspicion. “Were we *brought* to the hospital or were we *sent* to the hospital?” she asked.

“Well, you were *brought* to the hospital by an ambulance,” Dr. Jackson said. “And it was *sent* here because all four of you were found unconscious on a sidewalk. Does that answer your question?”

The Book Huggers shared a look—their newest suspicion had been all but confirmed.

“Do *you* work for *them*?” Lindy asked.

“For who?” Dr. Jackson asked.

“The people who don’t want us knowing what we know,” Mindy said.

“*What* do you know?” Dr. Jackson asked. “And *who* doesn’t want you

knowing it?"

The Book Huggers could tell that the psychologist was genuinely confused. Perhaps she wasn't as informed as they thought.

"Maybe it's best if we don't tell you," Lindy said. "They might lock you up next!"

"We've been here for three days—but they can't keep us in here forever!" Cindy said.

"We know our rights!" Mindy said.

Wendy leaped out of her seat and went to the door. She yanked on the handle with all her might, but the door didn't budge.

"Ms. Takahashi, if you'd like to leave, just *push* the door open," Dr. Jackson said. "No one is keeping you here against your will."

Wendy turned the door handle and pushed it open easily. She blushed and took her seat.

"Prisoners or not, we know that someone very high up doesn't want us spreading *the facts*," Cindy said. "That's the real reason we're here!"

"I'm glad you brought that up," Dr. Jackson said. "I think it would do us all some good if we go over the facts together and take a break from suspicions."

Dr. Jackson went down a list on her notepad, hoping it would comfort the girls if she put things into perspective.

"You were found unconscious—that's a fact," the psychologist listed. "Just like any young person found in your condition, you were brought to this hospital to be examined—that's also a fact. When you regained consciousness, you told the doctors that you had seen 'pirates appear out of thin air,' and that you had overheard a discussion about 'recruiting armies of fictional characters' and a 'threatened fairy-tale world.'"

"Yeah," Mindy said. "Because we *did*!"

"Why do you think we fainted in the first place?" Cindy asked.

"That aside, usually when patients awake from a trauma and describe such eccentric events, I'm asked to have a word with them to make sure there isn't any psychological damage," Dr. Jackson explained. "This is all standard procedure, and I assure you that no one *high up* has any control over you."

The Book Huggers slumped in their chairs. Given the circumstances, perhaps the psychologist had been brought in for legitimate reasons. Maybe

it wasn't part of a big conspiracy against them like they thought.

"We're just so tired of being told we're wrong when we know we're right," Mindy said.

"It's very unlikely four different people would have the exact same hallucination at once," Cindy said.

"But no one will listen to us," Lindy said. "Every time we try to tell someone what we've uncovered, they either hang up, point to the door, or threaten restraining orders."

The Book Huggers were getting worked up. Dr. Jackson raised her hands to calm them down.

"Ladies, it's *my job* to listen," Dr. Jackson said. "Tell me what you saw, what you heard, and what you're worried about. I'll be honest about what I believe is real or exaggerated, but I'll also be open-minded."

The Book Huggers eyed one another apprehensively. Dr. Jackson was the first person to have shown interest willingly. She took vigorous notes as the teenagers explained the cause of their paranoia.

"It started in junior high," Mindy said. "Alex and Conner Bailey disappeared without a trace, and no one could give us a good reason why. We wanted to know the truth, but the more answers we looked for, the more questions we found."

"It seemed like there was something our school, our city, and possibly the government were keeping from us," Cindy said. "Finally, after a year of searching, we saw the twins in a restaurant called the Storybook Grill four days ago!"

"We heard them talking about 'recruiting armies of fictional characters' to save a 'fairy-tale world,'" Lindy said. "It confirmed all our suspicions that something much deeper was going on! That's when we snuck to their house, peered through the window, and saw the pirates and their ship appear out of thin air!"

To their surprise, Dr. Jackson was *relieved* to hear this. She set her notes aside and a big smile came to her face. She even gave a thumbs-up to the mirror, which the Book Huggers thought was very odd.

"Ladies, I have good news for you," the psychologist said. "I believe every word you just said."

The Book Huggers were shocked. They had never heard those words come out of someone's mouth before. For a second, they thought Dr.

Jackson—not the pirates at the twins' house—might be a hallucination.

"You believe us?" Cindy asked.

"Absolutely," Dr. Jackson said. "You aren't experiencing delusions or hallucinations—you're suffering from a simple *misunderstanding*. You see, the twins' mother and stepfather work at this hospital. As a surprise, they hired a group of entertainers to perform for the patients in a show. The pirates you saw at their house are just performers and the ship was probably a set piece."

"A set piece?" Lindy asked. *"But it appeared out of thin air!"*

"Haven't you ever seen a magician or a Broadway show?" Dr. Jackson said. "That's what good set pieces do—it's all part of an illusion."

The Book Huggers shook their heads and covered their ears. They didn't want to believe what the psychologist was telling them—it was all too simple!

"No!" Mindy said. "That can't be it! There has to be more to the story than that!"

"I understand your confusion," Dr. Jackson said. "I met the performers yesterday. Their costumes were so colorful and elaborate, had Mrs. Gordon not explained to me who they were, I might have been just as puzzled as you."

"But that doesn't explain the conversation we heard over dinner!" Cindy said. "Why would they say things like 'recruiting armies' to save 'a threatened fairy-tale world'? Those aren't words normal people use to describe a show!"

"I imagine they were using code words to keep the performance a secret," Dr. Jackson proposed. "I'm sure it took them a very long time to put it together, and they were being extra-cautious. This is a small town—people talk, and clearly people listen."

The Book Huggers had put so much time and effort into tracking down and exposing the Baileys—it couldn't have all been for a *performance*! They were intelligent girls; they should have spotted a misunderstanding from a mile away.

The teenagers rocked in their seats, trying to think of where they went wrong. Dr. Jackson glanced up at the clock.

"Actually, the performance is tonight," she said. "But if it's *that* unsettling to you, I would recommend sitting it out. Now that we know you

aren’t suffering any psychological damage, I recommend you all go home and get a good night’s rest. Doctor’s orders.”

Once the psychologist prescribed the troubled Book Huggers some sleep, she escorted the girls back to their parents and headed to the hospital’s multi-purpose room.

Thanks to the characters’ hard work, Trollbella’s thorough direction, and a little touch of Alex’s magic, they had put together a performance for Saint Andrew’s Children’s Hospital in just under a day. The quality of it was questionable, but it was a performance nonetheless. The tedious and frantic task had created a much-needed union among the characters and taught them to work together—which was necessary if they planned on joining forces to defeat the Literary Army.

The pirates of the *Dolly Llama* and the Tin Woodman constructed a large stage with red velvet curtains at the far end of the multi-purpose room. The sailors set up the chairs and made sure every patient, their families, and all the hospital employees had a seat.

Cyborg soldiers were hung from the ceiling and their illuminated body parts were pointed toward the stage like lights. The Cyborg Queen herself converted into a large spotlight and was operated by Commander Newters. Instead of using the hospital’s electricity, all the Cyborgs were hooked up to Bolt, who functioned like a human generator.

The other Ziblings were working behind the scenes. After Morph had assisted with costumes by turning into a sewing machine, the shape-shifter transformed into the set. Since Whipney had the most dexterity, she was put in charge of props. Blaze was assigned special effects, but it was the easiest job in the entire show since there was only one, at the very end.

Trollbella insisted the performance have programs so the audience would have something tangible to take away. Bob helped her design the exact flyer she had in mind, and one was laid on every seat. The programs read:

DR. BOB & NURSE CHARLOTTE PROUDLY PRESENT

A Trollbella Production

The Life and Times of Queen Trollbella

Written and Directed by

Trollbella

Starring

Trollbella
& FRIENDS

At around fifteen minutes to eight o'clock, the multi-purpose room began filling up with an eager audience. Doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff escorted the patients and their families to their seats. Some children were rolled in on wheelchairs or transported in their hospital beds. Although the children weren't feeling their best, they looked around the room keenly, curious about what was waiting for them on the other side of the curtain.

Alex and Bob were sitting together in the front row. Alex couldn't sit still and nervously shook her legs and bit her nails.

"Are you worried about the show?" Bob asked.

"Not the show," she said. "I'm worried about Conner and Mom. I was expecting them to be back by now."

Bob laughed. "You look just like your mother when she's worried about you and your brother," he said.

"Now that I know how it feels, I'm never going to keep her waiting again," Alex said. "I hope they're all right. It's not that I don't trust them, or that I think they need *me*, it's just… just…"

Alex couldn't think of the words to describe the feeling.

"You just *love* them, Alex," Bob said. "It's as simple as that."

To Alex's relief, just a few minutes before the performance started, Conner and Charlotte hurried into the multi-purpose room and found her and Bob at the front. They had come straight from "The Adventures of Blimp Boy" and Conner hadn't even had a chance to take off his backpack.

"Well?" Alex asked. "How did it go? Did you find the talisman?"

Conner and Charlotte exchanged a smile. Conner pulled the talisman out from under his shirt and showed his sister.

"Let's just say there's a blimp parked in the field next to the hospital and there's a thousand mummified soldiers and one mummified dog in the commissary," Conner said.

"So it's done!" Alex said. "We've recruited all the soldiers we need to take on the Literary Army!"

The twins were so thankful the recruitment was finally over. They couldn't have done it without the help of their mom and stepdad, so they pulled Bob and Charlotte into a tight family hug. It may not have been the family vacation their mom was looking for, but the twins and their parents had accomplished something extraordinary together.

Bob noticed a foul scent lingering around Conner and Charlotte.

"What's that smell?" he asked.

"Mummies," Charlotte said. "I sprayed each of them with perfume and disinfectant, but *decay* isn't an easy odor to take off."

"Should we tell the others before or after the performance?" Conner asked.

"Let's wait," Alex said. "If they pull off the performance, we'll have two miracles to celebrate."

"Is it any good?" Conner asked.

Alex hesitated to answer. "Let's just say it probably won't be your *favorite* show," she said. "Trollbella took some *liberties*."

The lights dimmed and all the audience members sat in their seats. The Cyborgs illuminated the stage, and Commander Newters aimed the Cyborg Queen's spotlight at the center of the curtain. Trollbella stepped through the curtain and waved to the crowd. All the children gasped—they had never seen such a lifelike troll before. The troll queen went to the microphone stand and greeted the audience.

"Good evening, big room of small people," Trollbella said. "Welcome to tonight's performance. As you probably know, I am Queen Trollbella of the

Troblin Kingdom. If you don't know, please ask the person beside you to slap you. I am known for many things in my kingdom: beauty, intelligence, charisma, elegance, *passion*—but I'm best known for bringing my nation together. Thanks to my brilliant leadership, what was once a territory of greedy trolls and obnoxious goblins is now a kingdom of respectable and sophisticated Troblins. Tonight you will see that transformation before your symmetrical human eyes in 'The Life and Times of Queen Trollbella'!"

Conner was already annoyed and it was just the introduction. The audience sat on the edge of their seats—they were loving it. Trollbella dragged the microphone stand to the side of the stage and snapped at Commander Newters to keep the spotlight on her.

The curtains opened to reveal a dismal set depicting the Troll and Goblin Territory. The Merry Men and the Lost Boys ran onstage in ridiculous costumes. The men were dressed in green and wore goblin ears over their own. The boys wore brown and headbands with horns. All of them looked very uncomfortable.

"We are the goblins!" the Merry Men announced.

"We are the trolls!" the Lost Boys said.

"The kingdoms of man have forced us to live with the trolls," the Merry Men said.

"The kingdom of fairies has forced us to live underground with the goblins," the Lost Boys said.

"None of us are pleased," they said together.

"OH THE AGONY!" Robin Hood said. *"SORRY, THAT WASN'T IN THE SCRIPT. I JUST THOUGHT THE SCENE COULD USE A LITTLE PIZZAZZ."*

The Merry Men and the Lost Boys were terrible performers. Many of them stood motionless with dead eyes and said their lines like robots. Others put way too much effort into their characters and pranced around the stage. Some of them were terrified to be in front of an audience; others enjoyed it too much. Despite their problematic stage presence, they were entertaining to watch. The children in the audience laughed at everything they said.

"WHY DON'T WE PUT ASIDE OUR DIFFERENCES AND FORM OUR OWN NATION?" Robin Hood said.

"Robin, you're skipping lines!" Tootles said.

“APOLOGIES!” Robin Hood said. “I AM THE GOBLIN KING AND I HATE TROLLS!”

“And I am the Troll King and I hate goblins,” Tootles said. “How can we live together underground? *Now say it!*”

“WHY DON’T WE PUT ASIDE OUR DIFFERENCES AND FORM OUR OWN NATION?” Robin Hood asked.

“That is a good idea!” Tootles said. “We will form the Troll and Goblin Territory, start our own society, and prove we are not savage creatures!”

“Hooray,” the men and boys said with very little enthusiasm.

Trollbella cleared her throat to get the audience’s attention. “The trolls and goblins lived harmoniously in the underground territory for many years, until tragedy struck!” she narrated.

All the performers froze on the stage. They waited for something to happen, but nothing did.

“I said *until tragedy struck*!” Trollbella repeated. *“Braid girl, that’s your cue!”*

“Sorry, I was texting!” Whipney called from backstage.

Using her hair, Whipney lowered onto the stage two pillows painted to look like rocks. The “rocks” gently touched both Robin Hood and Tootles on the head. The actors fell to the floor and acted out dramatic death scenes. Tootles’s performance was much simpler than Robin Hood’s, who convulsed around the stage for almost five minutes before he lay still.

“GOOD-BYE, CRUEL WORLD!” Robin Hood shouted. *“THAT WASN’T IN THE SCRIPT, EITHER! I BELIEVE IT’S CALLED AN ABBY LID!”*

Trollbella shot him a dirty look and then turned to the audience.

“Sometimes rocks fall and you die—that’s just life,” Trollbella said into the microphone. “With the Troll King and the Goblin King both gone, the territory needed a new ruler!”

Red suddenly rose from a trapdoor in the center of the stage. She was dressed similar to Trollbella, with horns and a brown dress. All the performers sang like an angelic chorus as she entered, but none of them could find the right note or harmonize.

“I am the Troll King’s only daughter, Trollbella,” Red said. “I will be your new queen and guide you to prosperity! And… and… *what’s the rest of my line*?”

"My heart is so full!" Trollbella whispered.

"Yes, that's it," Red said. "And my heart is so full, I can't imagine needing anything else but the affection and gratitude of my people!"

Peter Pan suddenly flew across the stage wearing a large cardboard heart. It was completely unexpected, by both the audience and the other performers. The children pointed him out to one another, wondering how the boy was able to fly.

"Not yet, Peter!" Trollbella snipped, and continued the narration. "Although she thought her heart was full, the young queen soon realized something was missing. There was a void in her life that the trolls and goblins couldn't fill."

Jack stepped onstage dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt.

"I'm the handsome Butterboy," Jack announced. "I'm the queen's soul mate. I just don't know it yet because I'm emotionally immature. *Sorry, Conner*."

Conner was so embarrassed, he sank into his seat and covered his face with his backpack. Trollbella was sporting a wide grin—this was her favorite part of the show. Red struck a theatrical pose with her hands over her heart.

"Be still my heart, for I am in love!" Red announced.

"Now, Peter!" Trollbella whispered.

Peter soared out from backstage and flew in circles over the audience. The children laughed and clapped—they reached up and tried to touch him. Conner was irritated by how much they were enjoying the show.

"Hello, Butterboy!" Red said to Jack. "Would you like to be my king and rule the trolls and goblins with me? Oh, how happy we will be together!"

"Oh boy, that sounds wonderful!" Jack said. "How lucky I am to be loved by such a beautiful and brilliant troll queen. I will never find someone like her ever again—nope, not once, no how, no way, not going to happen! I want to be with Trollbella for all eternity!"

"I never said that!" Conner shouted from his seat. "She's making this up!"

Trollbella glared down at him from the stage. *"If you get to tell stories, so do I!"*

Jack and Red ran toward each other in slow motion across the stage.

Suddenly, the lights began flickering melodramatically. Goldilocks stomped onto the stage dressed as a large yellow toad with big warts and a purple beanie. Of all the performers, she looked the least excited to be there.

"I am the terrible Bree Monster," Goldilocks announced. "My mission in life is to rid others of happiness. I must keep Butterboy away from Queen Trollbella so their powerful love does not inspire others. I will bewitch Butterboy with a curse so he thinks he has feelings for me, when in reality, I'm so hideous I can't be loved by anyone."

"Oh, come on!" Conner said. "This is just ludicrous!"

The audience booed as Goldilocks dragged Jack off the stage. Red lowered her head and pretended to cry.

"After Butterboy was taken from her, Trollbella became very sad," Trollbella narrated. "But luckily, the troll queen was so commonsensical, she bounced back quickly. She used her misfortune to create something positive!"

"If I can't have my Butterboy, I'll put all my energy into being queen!" Red said with a big smile. "I'll help the trolls and goblins improve their image by combining them into *the Troblins*! We'll turn our territory into a brand-new kingdom so the world will see how much we've changed!"

"The troll queen made the world a much better place for the trolls and goblins," Trollbella said. "Although it broke her heart to be away from Butterboy, the distance taught the queen a valuable lesson and a secret to success: When you can't have what you want, make the most out of what you have!"

A big sign hanging above the stage suddenly caught on fire. It burned THE END and the curtains closed.

Conner was thankful the show was over. "Well, that was probably the worst piece of theater in the history of—"

He was interrupted by thunderous applause coming from behind him. Conner turned around and saw every patient in the hospital clapping ecstatically and smiling from ear to ear. Trollbella's show might have been stupid and silly, but it was exactly what the audience needed. It gave the patients of Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital a night off from their troubles and an evening of mindless fun.

When the curtains opened again, Trollbella and her company reappeared

and took a bow. The audience cheered loudly and the patients who could stand gave them a standing ovation. The performers could feel the patients' gratitude in the applause and they bowed again and again until the clapping stopped.

After the show, the characters came down off the stage and mingled with the audience. They took pictures, signed autographs, and did everything they could to make the patients feel special. The doctors and nurses appreciated how the performers "stayed in character" while visiting with the children, never suspecting the actors were actually who they claimed to be.

Dr. Jackson and Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael found Bob and Charlotte in the crowd and shook their hands.

"Thank you for such a *unique* performance," Mrs. Carmichael said.

"It wasn't Shakespeare," said Mr. Carmichael. "But on the bright side, *it wasn't Shakespeare*."

"I've never seen so many smiling faces in this hospital," Dr. Jackson said. "It was so kind of you to treat the children to a night of fun."

"It was our pleasure," Charlotte said. "It's amazing what a story can do."

It was getting late, and the doctors and nurses escorted the patients out of the multi-purpose room and back to their own rooms. Tootles was a little confused about where to go and wandered off with the other children. Luckily the twins spotted him before he went too far.

"I'll get him," Alex told Conner. "Actually, it's probably best if I do a lap around the hospital to make sure he isn't the only one who's wandered off. You should share your good news with the others!"

Alex followed Tootles out of the multi-purpose room. Conner waited until everyone had left but his parents, the characters from "Starboardia," "Galaxy Queen," and "The Ziblings," and his friends from the fairy-tale world. He stood on a chair and whistled to get the group's attention.

"Congratulations on a good show, everyone," Conner said. "Trollbella put together a really *creative* and *totally fictional* show. You should all be very proud of yourselves!"

"Fiction is a matter of opinion, Butterboy," Trollbella said, and winked at him.

Conner ignored her. "Now, I have some great news to share!" he said. "My mom and I went into my last story and recruited one thousand

mummified soldiers into our army! We finally have enough people to face the literary villains and take back the fairy-tale world!"

The characters erupted into cheers and applause of their own. Their spirits were already high from the performance, but the news sent their spirits soaring. Jack, Goldilocks, and Red shared a celebratory hug.

"That's fantastic!" Red said. "I was getting so tired of that commissary!"

"Good job, my friend," Jack said, and patted Conner on the back.

"Well done, Conner," Goldilocks said. "We couldn't have done it without YOOOOOUU!"

Her words turned into a scream, and the room went silent. The color drained from her face and her mouth dropped open. Goldilocks looked to Jack and grabbed his hand.

"Goldie?" Jack asked. "What is it?"

"Jack, my water just broke," Goldilocks said. *"I'm going into labor!"*

All the characters glanced at one another in panic. This was such an anticipated moment, but no one was prepared for it. They were characters from children's stories—none of *them* knew how to deliver a baby!

"Quick! We need scissors, boiling water, and recycled paper!" Red shouted. "Or is that for papier-mâché?"

Trollbella covered her eyes. *"Keep it inside while I'm in the room!"* she said. *"I don't want to see a baby come out of you!"*

"CALL THE MIDWIFE AND WET NURSE!" Robin Hood yelled. "BUT DON'T TELL THEM I SENT YOU!"

"Everyone calm down," Charlotte said. "I'm a nurse—I know what to do. Bob, make some calls and see if there's an ob-gyn close by. I'll take her to the operating room in the new wing of the hospital and get her prepped."

"Got it," Bob said.

"Isn't Bob a doctor?" Red asked. "Can't he help?"

"He's not that kind of doctor," Conner said.

"There are different *kinds* of doctors in the Otherworld?" Red asked. "That just seems unnecessarily complicated to me."

Bob immediately got on his phone and Charlotte quickly retrieved a wheelchair. They were in a room filled with cutthroat pirates, advanced Cyborgs, and daring superheroes—but Charlotte was the one taking the situation by the horns. It was fun for Conner to watch his characters gawking at his mom. Just like he told her on the blimp, she was the true

hero.

Charlotte gently sat Goldilocks in the wheelchair and pushed her down the hall. Jack held Goldilocks's hand as they traveled and Red followed them.

"You guys stay here!" Conner told his characters. "When Alex gets back, tell her where we are!"

"Good luck!" all the characters said together.

Conner ran down the hall and caught up with the others.

"Goldilocks, how's the pain?" Charlotte asked.

"Not terrible, actually," Goldilocks said. "The contractions aren't nearly as bad as I was expecting—NEVER MIND, THEY'RE BAD! THEY'RE REALLY, REALLY BAD!"

"Ouch, my hand!" Jack cried.

"Thank goodness you're in a children's hospital, Goldie!" Red said. "I can't imagine a better place in the world to have a baby! Good timing!"

"Red, babies aren't born in children's hospitals," Conner said. "They're usually delivered at standard hospitals."

"That makes absolutely no sense!" Red said. "This world is so backward!"

They traveled through Saint Andrew's to the operating room in the new wing of the hospital. Conner ran ahead and held the doors for the others to enter. When they went into the operating room, there were three people waiting inside—two of whom were the last people Conner was expecting to see.

"Bree? Emmerich?" he said in shock. "What are you doing here?"

His friends were standing with an old woman no one recognized. Conner could instantly tell that Bree and Emmerich weren't their normal selves. They both looked pale, exhausted, and frightened.

"Conner!" Bree said frantically. "I didn't know you would be here, too!"

"Bree, what are you guys doing here?" Conner asked. "Is something wrong?"

Bree burst into tears. "I'm so sorry," she cried. "I didn't want to bring him, but I had no choice."

The doors slammed shut and locked behind them. Conner, Charlotte, Jack, Goldilocks, and Red turned around and saw the Masked Man behind them. He had a crazed look in his eye and he raised a revolver toward them.

Tonight’s surprises were just getting started.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ALEX ALONE

Alex found Tootles before he wandered into the Saint Andrew's ICU and escorted him back to the multi-purpose room. Alex completed a quick round of the hospital, and the Lost Boy appeared to be the only character who had strayed from the group.

Right before Alex rejoined the others in the multi-purpose room, she saw something out of the corner of her eye: A woman with horns was entering the women's restroom down the hall. Alex could have sworn Trollbella was with the others when she left, but she decided to inspect the bathroom just to be sure. Who else would have horns in a hospital?

Alex searched the women's restroom, but didn't find the troll queen anywhere.

"Trollbella?" Alex asked. "Was that you?"

Morina suddenly lunged out of a bathroom stall and blew a handful of magic dust directly into Alex's face. Alex was so startled she gasped, breathing the dust deeply into her lungs. She coughed like she was choking on poisonous gas, and her eyes watered like she had been hit with pepper spray.

"What… what have you done to me?" she cried.

"I've enhanced you," Morina said with a wicked smile.

Alex collapsed on the floor and tried to recuperate, but she couldn't catch her breath or stop crying. The witch stared down at Alex, like a vulture waiting for its prey to die.

"That's it," Morina said. "Let it sink in, let it course through your veins, let it *consume* you.…"

The coughing and tears eventually subsided, but the irritation was replaced by even harsher symptoms. Alex was filled with more anger than

she had ever felt in her entire life. She tried to fight the magic manipulating her emotions, but the struggle only infuriated her even more. Why was her life a constant battle? Why did she have to fight so hard? Why did *she* always have to save so many others?

To comfort herself, Alex thought of the people she loved, but the dust wouldn't let Alex *feel* love. As visions of her friends and family flashed before her eyes, the spell convinced her that they all secretly hated her and wished she would disappear. She thought her brother resented her, that her mother was ashamed of her, that her grandmother had died disappointed in her, and that her father had died just as an excuse to abandon her.

Alex grabbed the sink and pulled herself to her feet. She looked into the mirror but didn't see her own reflection. Alex only saw the face of a complete failure. The dust altered not only her perception of the world, but also how she viewed herself. She saw a girl who didn't deserve affection, who was unworthy of success, and who was incapable of anything but making mistakes.

She wasn't going to save her friends, she wasn't going to defeat the Literary Army, and she wasn't going to save the fairy-tale world. It would fall apart like everything else in her life, and Alex had only herself to blame.

"Do you feel the anger boiling inside of you?" Morina asked. "Let it grow, let it shape you, let it blind you.… Let it *become* you."

The bathroom walls and floor started to shake and the lights flickered. Alex's eyes began to glow, and her hair rose above her head like flames in slow motion. She disappeared from her body and the magic dust transformed her into someone else entirely.…

Chapter Twenty-Seven

CEMETERY OF THE UNDEAD

Conner was so stunned to see the Masked Man in the hospital, he lost his train of thought. He didn't stop to wonder what Bree and Emmerich were doing with the Masked Man, how they'd got there, or who the older woman with them was. All he could think about was getting his friends and his mom away from such a dangerous man.

"They said you were dead," Conner said.

"I've lived to seize another day," the Masked Man said. "Sorry to disappoint you."

Charlotte looked at the Masked Man like she was seeing a ghost. Despite his injuries and tattered clothes, he was the spitting image of her late husband. Alex and Conner had tried so carefully to keep his existence a secret from their mother, but the disturbing reality was right in front of her face.

"Mom, this man isn't Dad," Conner said. "It's his younger brother, Lloyd. He's a criminal from the fairy-tale world, don't believe a word he—"

"I know who he is, Conner," Charlotte said. "Your father told me all about him before you were born. I'm sorry you know about him. Your father never wanted you to find out you were related to such a horrible person."

"You're not the only person he's related to, Conner," Bree said. "Emmerich is the Masked Man's son—he's the child the Masked Man had with Bo Peep!"

The information was so unexpected, Conner felt like he had been slapped. He remembered the story Hagetta had told him and his sister about hiding Bo Peep's child from his father, but that was long before they discovered who the Masked Man really was. Conner had forgotten all about

the child until this moment.

"I guess that makes us cousins," Emmerich said.

"This has turned into quite the family affair," the Masked Man said. "But I'm afraid it won't be remembered as a *pleasant* reunion."

"What do you want from us?" Conner said.

The Masked Man grunted. "*Teenagers*," he sneered. "You always think both worlds revolve around you. To be frank, dear nephew, you're quite useless to me."

"Then what do you want with Alex?" Conner asked.

"He's not here for your sister, either," Bree said. "He's come to the hospital to take your mom!"

"Me?" Charlotte said. "What could you possibly want with me?"

"I'm in need of an Otherworld nurse," the Masked Man said. "You see, the medical knowledge of the fairy-tale world isn't as advanced as it is here, and I'm in the market for a complicated procedure."

Goldilocks moaned as another contraction began.

"This woman is about to have a baby," Charlotte said. "Please, we need to get her to a doctor immediately."

"What a coincidence—I'm going to need a lift out of the hospital," the Masked Man said. "I thought I'd have to give the old woman here a bullet wound to do it, but the mother-to-be is even more convenient."

"You won't lay a finger on her!" Jack yelled.

Jack charged toward him, but the Masked Man fired his gun into the air and Jack froze.

"That was my only warning," the Masked Man said. "I will not *waste* another bullet—that goes for all of you."

Their captor was growing visibly impatient. His most recent scheme was so close to fruition, he could almost taste it. He paced around the room and gave his hostages more insight into what he had in store.

"This is what's going to happen," the Masked Man said. "Charlotte is going to collect from this room whatever she needs to perform a *blood transfusion*. Then she, Emmerich, and myself are going to escort Goldilocks downstairs to the emergency room. We're going to tell the paramedics Goldilocks needs to be transferred to another medical facility, and as they load her into the ambulance, we're going to steal it. Then we're going to drive far away, where Charlotte will transfer my son's blood into my own

veins, until there isn't a drop left in the boy."

His plan was so barbaric, it took Conner a moment to understand the reasoning behind it.

"If Emmerich is your son, that means there's magic in his blood," Conner thought aloud. "You want his blood to regain your powers. You're so obsessed with power, you're willing to kill your own son!"

"I'm willing to kill more if I have to," the Masked Man warned.

"I'm not draining your son's blood!" Charlotte said.

The Masked Man pointed his gun at Conner. "I'll find ways of convincing you," he said.

The tense silence was broken by another painful cry as Goldilocks's contractions increased.

"It's okay, Charlotte," Emmerich said. "I'm not scared—I'd rather he hurts me than anyone else. I'm sure it'll just feel like I'm falling asleep."

Charlotte would have sacrificed herself before harming a child, but Emmerich had given the nurse an idea. The Masked Man nudged her toward the supply cabinet and she collected syringes, gauze, bags, surgical tape, and other equipment. Charlotte put everything she needed for a blood transfusion into a large bag—and pocketed a little something extra.

"Now everyone else lie on the floor," the Masked Man ordered. "Emmerich, take those ACE bandages out of the cupboard and tie their hands and feet together. Make sure the knots are tight—I'll be checking before we leave."

With no alternative options in sight, Conner, Jack, Cornelia, Red, and Bree did as the Masked Man demanded. Emmerich tied their hands tightly behind their backs and their feet together. The Masked Man inspected his son's knots to make sure they'd last. Once he was satisfied, he tucked the revolver under his sling—making a point to show his hostages it was hidden but easily accessible if he needed it.

"Now let's go," he said.

Charlotte wheeled Goldilocks out of the room with the bag of supplies, and they headed for the emergency room. The Masked Man pushed Emmerich out the door, and they followed the women. The others left in the operating room struggled against the bandages with all their might, but they wouldn't budge.

"We have to do something!" Jack said desperately. "Goldilocks is about

to give birth! Who knows what that madman might do to her!"

"Help us!" Cornelia yelled. *"Help us!"*

"Let me try," Red said. "No offense, but I'm an attractive young blonde—someone's more likely to answer me! HELP US! HELP US!"

"Guys, we're the only people in an empty hospital wing!" Conner said. "No one can hear us!"

"We have to stop him!" Bree said. "He's going to kill Emmerich if we don't!"

"You see, this is why I'm not close to my own relatives!" Red said. "Families are nuts! They give you life, then you're lucky if you survive them!"

Red's rant inadvertently reminded Conner of something in his bag—something they could use!

"Survival!" Conner said happily. "That's it!"

Charlotte had packed Swiss Army knives in the twins' backpacks before they left for "Starboardia." Thankfully, the Masked Man hadn't instructed Conner to take his backpack off before he was tied up. If he could just reach the knife inside it, he might be able to cut himself free.

Conner rolled onto his back and with his tied hands painfully reached up to the backpack's front pouch. Just when it felt like he was about to break his arms, he pried the zipper open with his fingertips.

"Bree, see if you can find the Swiss Army knife in my bag," Conner said.

They shuffled around the floor until they were back to back and Bree was able to remove the small knife from his backpack.

"I got it," Bree said, and unfolded it. "Stay still—I'm going to cut the bandages around your wrists."

She sawed the small blade against Conner's bandages until she cut through them. Once Conner's hands were free he removed the bandages around his feet and sliced them off the others. They helped one another to their feet and ran out of the operating room, but Cornelia stayed behind.

"Cornelia, are you coming?" Bree asked.

"I can't keep up," Cornelia said. "Go! Get to them before it's too late! I'll call Wanda and Frenda and let them know where we are!"

"Cornelia, go to the multi-purpose room," Conner said. "Find my sister and tell her what's happened—her name is Alex and she looks like me."

“I will,” the old woman said. “Now hurry!”

Conner, Bree, Jack, and Red ran through the hospital as fast as they could. They followed the signs to the emergency room, pushed past the people waiting in the lobby, and ran out to the driveway where the ambulances were parked.

They arrived just in time to see two paramedics loading Goldilocks into the back of an ambulance. As soon as they shut the doors behind her, the ambulance screeched down the driveway, and the paramedics watched helplessly as the vehicle was stolen in plain sight. They ran inside the hospital to call the police. As the ambulance passed Conner and the others, they saw the Masked Man at the wheel and Charlotte and Emmerich sitting in the front beside him.

The driveway curved around the hospital like a horseshoe. If Conner ran straight ahead, he might be able to stop the ambulance—but with *what*? What did he have that could stop a speeding vehicle? As soon as he thought of the question, the answer hit him like a bolt of lightning hitting the Eiffel Tower.

“They’re getting away!” Bree yelled.

“Oh no they’re not!” Conner said. He ran across the driveway and retrieved the binder of short stories from his backpack. He flipped it open to the very last page and dived in front of the ambulance. Just before the vehicle ran him over, the beam of light hit the ambulance and it disappeared into his short story.

Jack and Red sighed with relief—they couldn’t believe Conner had pulled it off. Bree had no clue what had just happened, but she was amazed by what she saw.

“Come on!” Conner said. “Follow me!”

With no time to lose, Conner jumped into the beam of light and his friends followed him inside.

Since he had opened the binder to the very last page, Conner was certain he had sent the ambulance into “The Adventures of Blimp Boy.” He expected to see an Egyptian desert and the Pyramid of Anesthesia, but Conner didn’t recognize the world around him at all. In fact, he had never seen the strange environment they had landed in, not even in his imagination.

They were standing on a tall knoll surrounded by rolling hills of dark

soil. A full moon peeked through dark clouds above them, and a misty fog hung in the air. In the distance they saw a tall wrought-iron fence along the perimeter of an enormous and eerie cemetery. The fence guarded a sea of gothic tombstones, and through the fog beyond the graves, they could make out a forest of stone mausoleums.

The tombstones were so old they were cracked and covered in mildew and their engravings were virtually illegible. They were decorated in crucifixes and macabre statues of angels and the grim reaper. Even though the fog distorted the view, the cemetery seemed as endless as the deserts of Egypt. There wasn't a sign of life anywhere; there were no trees, grass, or flowers, only tombs for miles and miles around.

"Conner, were you in a bad mood when you wrote this story?" Red said.

"This isn't my story," Conner said. "I never wrote about anything like this."

Suddenly, they saw something moving across the graveyard. A red fox was prancing among the tombstones. The animal batted its eyes and twirled its tail flirtatiously, almost as if it were trying to lure them into the cemetery. Bree recognized the fox and rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn't seeing things.

"Conner, where was that beam of light supposed to take us?" Bree asked.

"It should have transported us into one of my short stories," he explained. "We've been using a potion to travel into my writing, but I have no clue where it's taken us."

Bree gulped nervously. "I do," she said. "This is *my* short story—we're in 'Cemetery of the Undead'! I wrote it in the eighth grade!"

Conner tried to make sense of the situation. How could they be in one of Bree's stories?

"I got my stories from Mrs. Peters," Conner said. "She must have mixed your writing with mine when she gave them to me! It's been in the back of my binder the whole time! I didn't have a divider between them, so the Portal Potion must have seeped through my writing and into yours."

Traveling into his own stories had been a jarring experience for Conner, but at least he knew where he was going. He couldn't imagine how Bree felt after accidentally stumbling into a world from her imagination with no prior warning.

“Look over there!” Jack said, and pointed.

They saw tire tracks and followed them into the cemetery. The ambulance had crashed into the fence just beside a wide-open gate. They checked the vehicle, but it was empty. A moan came from somewhere in the graveyard and they ran toward it.

“Goldie!” Jack shouted. *“We’re coming!”*

They found Goldilocks on the ground a few hundred feet inside the graveyard. She was leaning against a tombstone, with beads of sweat covering her forehead, and she was breathing deeply. Jack knelt beside her and held her hand.

“The Masked Man…” She panted. “I couldn’t keep up, so they left me here.… He took Emmerich and Charlotte somewhere over there.… I didn’t see which one they went inside.…”

Goldilocks pointed to the mausoleums, but there were hundreds of them. Finding Emmerich and Charlotte among them would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

“Let’s get you back to the hospital,” Jack said. He tried to get Goldilocks to stand, but she wouldn’t move.

“My contractions are too close together,” Goldilocks said. “I can’t stand! This baby is being born right here!”

Jack and the others exchanged fearful looks—Goldilocks needed help.

“You guys stay with Goldie,” Conner told them. “I’m going to find Emmerich and my mom. As soon as I get them away from the Masked Man, I’ll send my mom here to help.”

“I’m coming with you,” Bree said.

“You can’t, it’s too dangerous,” Conner said.

“Conner, I know you’re used to being the hero of your own stories, but this is mine,” Bree said. “I know this cemetery like the back of my hand. Besides, we only have twenty minutes until midnight—we have to get everyone out of here before then!”

“What happens at midnight?” Red asked.

Bree looked frightened. “The characters come out,” she said.

“What’s wrong with you writers?” Red yelled. “If you wrote instruction manuals, we wouldn’t have this problem!”

Goldilocks moaned again and squeezed Jack’s hand. They didn’t have much time before the baby arrived. Conner and Bree ran into the cemetery

and searched through the mausoleums one by one.

The Masked Man had taken Emmerich and Charlotte deep into the cemetery and forced them inside a mausoleum with stained glass windows and a statue of a fallen angel on the roof. He and his son sat on the casket inside as Charlotte prepared the equipment for the blood transfusion. The Masked Man kept a watchful eye on the nurse and a steady grip on his revolver as she worked.

To keep up appearances, Charlotte drew blood from Emmerich and let it fill a small bag. Emmerich watched the blood drain from his body as if it were sand pouring out of his personal hourglass.

"If you see my mom, please tell her I love her." The little boy sniffled.

"You can tell her yourself—I promise," Charlotte whispered, and winked at the young boy.

Next, the nurse prepared the Masked Man's IV. She made it as unpleasant for him as possible. She forcefully straightened his broken arm and stuck him with the dullest needle she had.

"Easy!" he barked.

Charlotte pulled a small vial out of her pocket and filled a syringe with its clear liquid. She started injecting the solution into the Masked Man's IV but he became suspicious and stopped her.

"What is that?" the Masked Man snarled.

"It's just saline," Charlotte said. "It's to prevent infection."

"I don't want you putting anything inside my veins except the child's blood."

"I can't put his blood into your system until the area is sterilized," Charlotte said. "If you don't want me to do my job correctly, then there was no point in leaving the fairy-tale world."

The Masked Man glared at her, held his revolver a little tighter, and allowed her to proceed. Charlotte injected the solution into his arm and watched him closely. The Masked Man suddenly felt very tired. His eyelids became heavy and the small mausoleum started spinning around him—*he had been tricked*! Charlotte hadn't injected him with *saline* but with a *sedative*!

"YOU WENCH!" the Masked Man yelled, and raised his revolver.

Charlotte twisted his broken arm and the Masked Man shrieked in agony. He dropped the gun and scrambled to the floor to retrieve it.

Charlotte threw the IV pole at the stained glass window and it shattered. She and Emmerich quickly crawled through it just as the Masked Man got his gun. He shot at them, but the sedative made him a lousy shot and he missed. The bullet ricocheted off the mausoleum's stone wall and hit the side of his right leg. He screamed in pain.

Conner and Bree were searching the mausoleums nearby when they heard the sounds of broken glass, gunfire, and screaming.

"Mom!" Conner gasped.

"Emmerich!" Bree said.

They ran toward the sounds, praying nothing had happened to either of them. A dark and foggy graveyard was scary by itself, but knowing a dangerous man was lurking nearby with a gun made Conner and Bree feel like they were in a real-life horror movie. They jumped at every statue they saw, afraid it was the Masked Man looming through the fog. Luckily, they ran into Charlotte first.

"Mom!" Conner said. "Thank God you're okay! Where's Emmerich?"

Charlotte's eyes darted around the cemetery. "He was right beside me a moment ago," she said. "We escaped from your uncle but got separated in the fog."

Another scream echoed through the cemetery, but this time it was coming from Goldilocks.

"Mom, you have to go and help her," Conner said. "Bree and I will find Emmerich."

From the look in her eyes, Conner knew leaving him and Bree alone was the last thing his mother wanted to do.

"We'll be fine," Conner said. "Right now, Goldilocks needs you!"

Charlotte was torn between her obligations as a mother and her duties as a nurse. But she had to remind herself she wasn't the mother of a normal child—she knew Conner was more than capable of taking care of himself. He had proven it time and time again.

"I love you, sweetheart," Charlotte said. "Be safe."

She hugged her son and kissed him on the cheek. Then Charlotte followed Goldilocks's moans to the front of the graveyard and prepared to deliver the child.

Conner and Bree hurried in the opposite direction, looking for their friend.

"Emmerich!" Bree whispered. *"Where are you?"*

They found Emmerich crouching behind a tombstone. He was trembling and looking around with large, frightened eyes. The fog was the thickest in this part of the cemetery, and he hadn't been able to tell who Bree and Conner were until they were just a few feet away from him.

"There you are!" Bree said.

"Conner! Bree!" Emmerich cried with relief. "Where's Charlotte?"

"She went back to help Goldilocks," Conner said. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

"NOT SO FAST!" shouted a voice behind them.

Conner and Bree slowly turned around and saw the Masked Man creeping toward them. He was in the worst shape of his life: His limp was much worse now that he had a sprained ankle *and* a bullet wound on the same leg. His clothes were covered in blood, and the sedative had made the bags under his eyes droopier than usual. He was fighting the medication off with all his remaining strength.

"The boy is coming with me!" the Masked Man yelled.

Conner stood between his uncle and Emmerich.

"No one is going anywhere with you!" he said.

"Stupid boy!" the Masked Man said. "Get out of my way or I'll shoot!"

"Go ahead!" Conner said. "You'll never be satisfied no matter how many people you kill and no matter how powerful you become! And if I can't stop you, my sister will! Good luck facing her once she finds out you killed me!"

The Masked Man ignored Conner and pointed his gun at his nephew's head. *"Give my regards to your father."*

Just as he was about to press his finger against the trigger, they were all startled by a loud scraping sound. The lids of three stone caskets nearby were pushed open, and the corpses inside suddenly stood up from their graves.

"What's going on?" Conner whispered to Bree.

She glanced down at her watch. "It's midnight," she said. "All the bodies in the cemetery come back to life for a few minutes every night to stretch their legs and visit with each other. It's supposed to be a morbid representation of what break time is like in a public high school!"

All three corpses were women, and although in Bree's story they were

less decomposed than they would have been in real life, each had obviously been dead for a long while. Their skin was so pale, it was a shade of blue, there were dark circles under their eyes, and parts of their bones stuck out from their skin.

The women wore very specific clothing from different eras in history. The first woman wore early-fifteenth-century armor, and her skin was partially burned. The second woman wore a dress with wide sleeves, a necklace with the letter *B*, and a headband with a long veil. The third woman wore an enormous ball gown and lots of jewelry and had a towering white wig. The two women in dresses also had stitches around their necks, as if their heads had been detached from their bodies and then sewn back on.

"Who are they?" Conner asked. "Why do they look so familiar?"

"This area of the cemetery is called 'Wronged Women Row,'" Bree said. "These are the women I thought had unfair deaths in history. That's Joan of Arc, Anne Boleyn, and Marie-Antoinette."

The historical figures stretched and yawned as they came back to life. It was like they were waking from a long nap rather than coming back from the dead.

"I just adore our nightly stretches," Joan of Arc said. "Don't you, Anne?"

"It certainly gives us something to *live* for." Anne Boleyn giggled.

"You know what I always say," Marie-Antoinette said. "Death is what you make of it. Just like everything else, it's all in the *execution*!"

The corpses laughed wildly among themselves. Apparently nothing tickled them more than jokes about their mortality. The women turned to a fourth casket in their row whose occupant hadn't risen yet.

"It looks like Bo is sleeping in again," Joan of Arc said.

"She'd better wake up and stretch, otherwise she'll be very stiff tomorrow," Anne Boleyn said.

"Oh, Bo, darling?" Marie-Antoinette called to the casket. "It's midnight, dear! Come out and join us!"

The lid on the casket slid open and a fourth corpse stood up in her grave. She wore a dainty dress and a bonnet and held a staff. She must have been the most recently departed, because she was far less decomposed than the other corpses were.

“Sorry, girls, I was counting sheep,” the woman said. “It helps me pass the time between stretches.”

“What’s your count up to now?” Joan of Arc asked.

“Twenty-eight million, nine hundred and seventy-four thousand, eight hundred and sixty-three,” the woman said.

Conner recognized the woman immediately. It caught him completely off guard because he thought he’d never see her again—even in a fictional story.

“That’s Bo Peep!” Conner whispered to Bree. “You put *her* in ‘Cemetery of the Undead’?”

“This must be my second draft,” Bree said. “I was upset by how Bo Peep died, so I added her to the story.”

As strange as it was to see their deceased acquaintance, it was nothing compared to how Emmerich felt at the sight of his birth mother. He had hundreds of questions he wanted to ask, but he was too afraid to speak.

Seeing her corpse come to life made the Masked Man feel like he had stepped into a nightmare. He couldn’t tell if she was really there or if she was just a hallucination brought on by the sedative.

“Bo Peep?” he asked in shock.

All the undead women turned to the sound of his voice. It was the first time they realized their row had visitors.

Bo Peep was enraged to see him. *“Lloyd!”* she yelled.

The other corpses gasped.

“Is this the man you were telling us about, Bo?” Joan of Arc asked.

“Yes, he is,” Bo Peep said. “He’s the one who *used* me, who *tricked* me, and who *broke my heart*! He’s the whole reason I’m in this cemetery! I’d still be alive if it weren’t for him!”

“And look—he’s not alone,” Anne Boleyn pointed out. “There are three young people with him.”

“I know them, too,” Bo Peep said. “What are the three of you doing with a man like *him*?”

“I promise, it’s not by choice!” Conner said. “He’s holding us hostage!”

Hearing this angered Bo Peep to no end. She stepped out of her casket and charged toward the Masked Man. He had never been so terrified in his entire life. He aimed his revolver at her, but it didn’t stop her from approaching him.

“Don’t come any closer or I’ll shoot!” he warned her.

“You can’t hurt me anymore,” Bo Peep said.

She reached toward him with her cold dead hands, and the Masked Man shot at her—using the third and final bullet in the revolver. Bo Peep looked down at the bullet hole in her torso, but it only infuriated her even more.

“Kill me once, shame on you. Kill me twice, shame on *me*!” she said.

“Get away!” the Masked Man said. “I’m warning you!”

“Your threats are as empty as your soul!” Bo Peep said.

The Masked Man hobbled away from her as quickly as his injured leg would allow. He wasn’t paying attention to where he was going, though, and fell right into an empty grave with an unmarked tombstone. He tried to climb out of it, but dozens of decaying hands suddenly stuck up from the dirt below and grabbed hold of him. They pulled on his legs, his arms, and his clothes and pulled him into the ground with them.

“UNHAND ME AT ONCE, YOU DEMONS!” the Masked Man yelled.

He screamed and tried to free himself, but there were too many for him to fight. The more he struggled, the more hands appeared. Even after he was completely underground, his screaming could still be heard aboveground, but the sound of his voice became fainter and fainter as he was pulled deeper and deeper into the earth.

When the noise had finally disappeared completely, an engraving appeared on the tombstone: HERE LIES LLOYD BAILEY—BELOVED BY NONE.

As much as Conner hated the Masked Man, it was still a terrifying thing to witness. He wondered if his uncle was really gone for good, but when he turned to Bree, he saw she looked just as frazzled as he did. Bree’s story of the undead had taken on a life of its own.

“Well, that’s all the excitement I can handle for one night,” Joan of Arc said.

“Time to go back to sleep,” Anne Boleyn said with a yawn.

“See you tomorrow night, girls,” Marie-Antoinette said. “Same time, same place—for all eternity.”

The women lay back down in their graves. They pulled the lids over their caskets, tucking themselves in for a good night’s rest. Bo Peep wandered back to her casket, but Bree stopped her before she stepped inside it.

“Bo?” Bree said. “I’m not sure this is the right thing to do, but if I were you I would want to know. It’s so difficult to say—I guess I’ll just spit it out: Emmerich is your son.”

Bo Peep stared at the young boy in bewilderment. If she still had a pulse, it would have been racing. If she still needed to breathe, she would have been breathless.

“You’re my *son*?” she asked.

“Yes,” Emmerich said.

“Hagetta said she would find you a good home. Did she?”

“She did,” he said. “I have a mother—an adoptive mother, who loves me very much.”

“That’s good to hear,” Bo Peep said. “Knowing that, I might finally be able to rest instead of counting sheep.”

Emmerich eyed Lloyd’s grave. “Is my father ever coming back?” he said.

“Not from where he’s going,” Bo Peep said. “He’ll never harm you or anyone else ever again.”

Bo Peep removed a small necklace from around her neck and placed it in her son’s hand. Bree and Emmerich remembered her showing it to them while they traveled down the secret path with the royals the year before. It had a thin chain and a small stone heart with a crack across it.

“Here, something to remember me by,” Bo Peep said. “You seem like a kind child. I’m sorry I didn’t raise you myself, but you were better off with your adoptive mother. I was too young and foolish to be a mother. You didn’t deserve to inherit my mistakes.”

“I understand,” he said.

“Good night, Emmerich,” she said. “I hope we see each other in our dreams.”

Bo Peep lay back in her casket and pulled the lid over her body. Bree put her arm around Emmerich as he watched her go. Once she was gone, he looked down at the necklace and held it tightly in his hand.

“Speaking of mothers,” Conner said, “we should probably find my mom and the others.”

Conner, Bree, and Emmerich hurried to the front of the cemetery to regroup with their friends. The closer they got, the louder and clearer the others’ voices became.

"Push, Goldilocks!" they heard Charlotte shout. *"Push! Push! Push!"*

"ERRRRRRRR!" Goldilocks grunted.

"You can do it, Goldie!" Jack encouraged his wife. *"You're almost there!"*

"I can see the head!" Charlotte declared. *"Just one more push!"*

"OH MY GOD, WHAT IS THAT?" Red screamed loudest of all. "I AM NEVER HAVING CHILDREN!"

Soon the sounds of a crying infant echoed through the cemetery. By the time Conner, Bree, and Emmerich found the others, Goldilocks and Jack were the proud parents of a healthy and beautiful baby boy. There wasn't a dry eye in the bunch.

Charlotte cleaned the baby off and wrapped him in towels she found in the ambulance. He had his mother's golden curls, his father's strong chin, and his aunt Red's doe-eyed expression.

"Jack, we're parents," Goldilocks said tearfully. "We have a son!"

"We're an official family," Jack said affectionately.

"We did it!" Red said, and burst into happy tears. *"I only wish Charlie was here to see it!"*

Although she had had nothing to do with creating the child, she hugged Jack and Goldilocks as if she were a new parent, too.

"What are you going to name him?" Conner asked.

"Hero," Goldilocks said confidently. "That way, it won't matter where he's from, what he becomes, or who his parents are—he'll always be the hero of his own story."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A SITUATION

As soon as they stepped through the beam of light and returned to the Otherworld, Charlotte and Jack took Goldilocks and Hero to the Saint Andrew's emergency room to be examined by a doctor. Conner, Bree, Emmerich, and Red went straight to the multi-purpose room to tell the others what had happened in the "Cemetery of the Undead" and to share the good news of Jack and Goldilocks's son.

Conner figured Cornelia must have spread the word about the Masked Man, because everyone in the multi-purpose room had a long, somber face and seemed worried sick. Even the Blissworm's smile wasn't as pronounced as it usually was. Bree and Emmerich were a little overwhelmed by all the people they didn't know but could have sworn they recognized.

"Conner!" Bob shouted. "Are you all right? Where's your mother?"

"Everything is fine, we're all safe," Conner said. "Mom is in the emergency room with Jack and Goldilocks. They have a son and they named him Hero! They're just getting checked out to make sure everything is okay."

"And what about that horrible man?" Cornelia asked.

"The Masked Man is gone," Conner said. "And this time, he's not coming back."

The news wasn't as comforting as Conner thought it would be. In fact, the expressions of the characters around the room didn't change. They didn't even seem excited about the new baby.

"Guys, what's wrong?" he asked. "You all look like someone died."

The characters parted and Conner realized they were gathered around the Tin Woodman. He sat in a chair beside Blubo, the small flying monkey.

The monkey was distraught and his eyes were puffy from crying.

"Blubo?" Conner asked. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you in the fairy-tale world with the others?"

"We wanted to share the good news about completing our army with the others back in the mine," the Tin Woodman said. "We traveled through the emerald storybook but when we arrived, they were all gone. *Everyone in the mine had been turned into stone!* Blubo was the only one who wasn't affected."

Conner shook his head as if he were trying to clear out the words he didn't want to hear.

"What?" he said. "You mean the royal families, the animals, the citizens, Hagetta, the Tradesman—"

"THEY WERE ALL STATUES!" Robin Hood said. "STILL AS ROCK AND PALE AS BONE."

"Oh no. *Granny*." Red gasped. "What happened to them?"

"Right after you left the mine, we were attacked by a horrible monster." Blubo sniffled. "I was so afraid, I hid and covered my eyes. I never even got a good look at it."

Conner had an idea of what had happened. "The creature that turned the Fairy Council into stone must have found a way into the mine," he said.

He walked in a circle around the room, wondering what to do next. Apparently he had left one crisis only to stumble into another. He looked for his sister but didn't see her.

"Has anyone seen Alex?" Conner asked.

"She hasn't been here since I arrived," Cornelia said.

"I'll check to see if she's in the bathroom," Red said.

Red left the room and sprinted down the hall. As soon as she opened the door of the women's restroom she let out a bloodcurdling scream.

"Conner!" Red yelled. *"Come quick! You need to see this right away!"*

He was already headed toward her before she finished the sentence. As Conner dashed down the hall, all the characters followed him. Whatever Red had found was so bad, she hadn't even needed to step inside the bathroom to see it. The queen just held the door open and stared inside in total shock.

Conner arrived at her side and peered into the bathroom—but there wasn't a bathroom to see. He saw the night sky and other buildings outside.

He looked up and saw into an empty office above; he looked down and saw into a deserted basement below. There was drywall, sparking electrical wires, and broken water faucets—it looked like an explosion had gone off.

Even though there was no evidence that Alex had caused it or that she had even been present for it, Conner knew in the pit of his stomach that it had something to do with his sister.

"Alex..." Conner said. *"What's happened to you?"*

President of the United States Katherine Walker was sitting in the Oval Office of the West Wing with two foreign ambassadors.

"Gentlemen," President Walker said, "I understand it's difficult for the prime minister and the sultan to agree on a location, but I'm not going to sit here day after day while innocent people are suffering because of their negligence. If we can't find a way to resolve this matter in the next forty-eight hours, I will put troops on the ground."

The meeting had been a major priority on the president's schedule and was booked weeks in advance. As far as she was concerned, no other matter was more important, and her entire afternoon had been cleared for the discussion. So it was surprising when the door of the Oval Office swung open and her Chief of Staff interrupted.

"Madam President," the Chief of Staff said. "I'm sorry for the interruption, but you're needed in the Situation Room immediately."

"What's wrong?" President Walker asked.

"It's best if you see it for yourself," the Chief of Staff said. "There's a *situation* in New York City."

"Terrorism?"

"No, ma'am," he said with difficulty. "Our most educated analysis, with all means of science and technology in mind, is that it's *magic*…."

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TURN THE PAGE FOR A SNEAK PEEK
OF THE BOOK THAT STARTED IT ALL!

AVAILABLE OCTOBER 2016

INTRODUCTION

A NOTE TO ALL STORYTELLERS

Imagine a world with *magic*. Now imagine this place is home to everything and everyone you were told wasn't "real." Imagine it has fairies and witches, mermaids and unicorns, giants and dragons, and trolls and goblins. Imagine they live in places like enchanted forests, gingerbread houses, underwater kingdoms, or castles in the sky.

Personally, I know such a place exists because it's where I'm from. This magical world is not as distant as you think. In fact, you've been there many times before. You travel there whenever you hear the words "Once upon a time." It's another realm, where all your favorite fairy-tale and nursery-rhyme characters live. In your world, we call it *the Land of Stories*.

For those of you familiar with fairy tales, I'm known as the Fairy Godmother. I'm best remembered for transforming Cinderella's raggedy clothes into a beautiful gown for the prince's ball—but I won't give anything else away in case you haven't read it. You'll be delighted to see it's the first story in this treasury.

I understand this all may come as a bit of a surprise. It's not every day you learn that a place like the Land of Stories exists outside one's imagination. Although it shouldn't be *that* shocking if you think about it:

After all, if fiction is inspired by mythology, and myths are just embellished legends, and legends are exaggerated history, then *all* stories must have an element of truth to them. And I can assure you that the fairy-tale world is as real as the book you're holding in your hands.

You're probably wondering *how* the stories of the fairy-tale world became so prevalent in your world. Allow me to explain, for I am entirely to blame.

Many centuries ago, I discovered your world by accident. After a long and wonderful career of helping people (like Cinderella) achieve their dreams, I was only eager to do more. So one day I closed my eyes, waved my magic wand, and said, "I wish to go someplace where people need me the most." When I opened my eyes, I was no longer in the Land of Stories.

When I first arrived, your world was enduring a time known as *the Dark Ages*, and there couldn't be a better description. It was a period consumed with poverty, plague, and war. People were suffering and starving, and they were very doubtful that conditions would get any better.

I did what I could to help the people I met: I treated the sick, I fed the hungry, and I even tried to stop the violence throughout the land. Unfortunately, nothing I did prevented the disease and destitution from spreading.

However, it wasn't *interaction* your world needed; it was *inspiration*. In a world dominated by ruthless kings and warlords, the ideas of *self-worth* and *self-empowerment* were unheard of. So I started telling stories about my world to entertain and raise spirits, especially the poor children's. Little did I know it would become the greatest contribution of my lifetime.

I told stories about cowards who became heroes, peasants who became powerful, and the lonely who became beloved. The stories taught many lessons, but most important, they taught the world how to dream. The ability to dream was a much-needed introduction to *hope*, and it spread like a powerful epidemic. Families passed the stories from generation to generation, and over the years I watched their compassion and courage change the world.

I recruited other fairies to help me spread the tales from the Land of Stories around the world, and the stories became known as *fairy tales*. Over time, we asked writers like the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Charles Perrault to publish the stories so they would live on forever.

During that time, I realized how important *storytelling* is. While philosophy and science help enhance our mind and body, storytelling stimulates our spirit. It broadens our imagination, teaches us valuable lessons, shows us that things are not always as they seem, and encourages us to reach our greatest potential.

With that said, I have a favor to ask of anyone reading this: *Become a storyteller!* Read to others the fairy tales in this book. Read them stories from another book. If you can, create your own stories to share. When you pass along the art of storytelling to your family and friends, you make the world a better place.

By inspiring someone, you stimulate that person's creativity; and when someone is gifted with creativity, he or she inherently holds the source of *progress* and *prosperity*. Creativity is the simple but powerful ability to make something from nothing, and it just so happens that *making something from nothing* is also the definition of *magic*.

Become a storyteller and help us keep fairy tales alive. Even if people don't believe in magic, never let the world forget what it represents. Wherever there is a storyteller, there will always be hope.

Thank you, and may you all have a *happily-ever-after*!

With love,
The Fairy Godmother

Contents

COVER

TITLE PAGE

WELCOME

DEDICATION

EPIGRAPH

PROLOGUE: THE FAVORITE STUDENT

CHAPTER ONE: THE MASKED EMPIRE

CHAPTER TWO: GROUNDED

CHAPTER THREE: THE FALLEN EMPEROR

CHAPTER FOUR: A NICE FAMILY DINNER

CHAPTER FIVE: CRIES FROM THE CASTLE

CHAPTER SIX: A BEWITCHING OFFER

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE CAPTAIN AND HER CREW

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE WRATH OF SMOKY-SAILS SAM

CHAPTER NINE: SAILING CIRCLES AROUND THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE

CHAPTER TEN: STARBOARDIA

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CURSES

CHAPTER TWELVE: MAKING A SPLASH ON SYCAMORE DRIVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: GALAXY QUEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: UNIVERSAL PESTS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE APPLE MEETS THE TREE

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: FULL HOUSE AND FULL HEARTS

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: REGROUPING

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: SAINT ANDREW'S CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE ZIBLINGS

CHAPTER TWENTY: PROFESSOR WALLET'S SECRET LABORATORY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: CITY OF LIGHTNING

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: A CASTLE OF QUESTIONS

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: FAMILIAR STRANGERS

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE ADVENTURES OF BLIMP BOY

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: "THE LIFE AND TIMES OF QUEEN TROLLBELLA"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: ALEX ALONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: CEMETERY OF THE UNDEAD

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: A SITUATION

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A SNEAK PEEK OF *THE LAND OF STORIES: A TREASURY OF CLASSIC FAIRY TALES*

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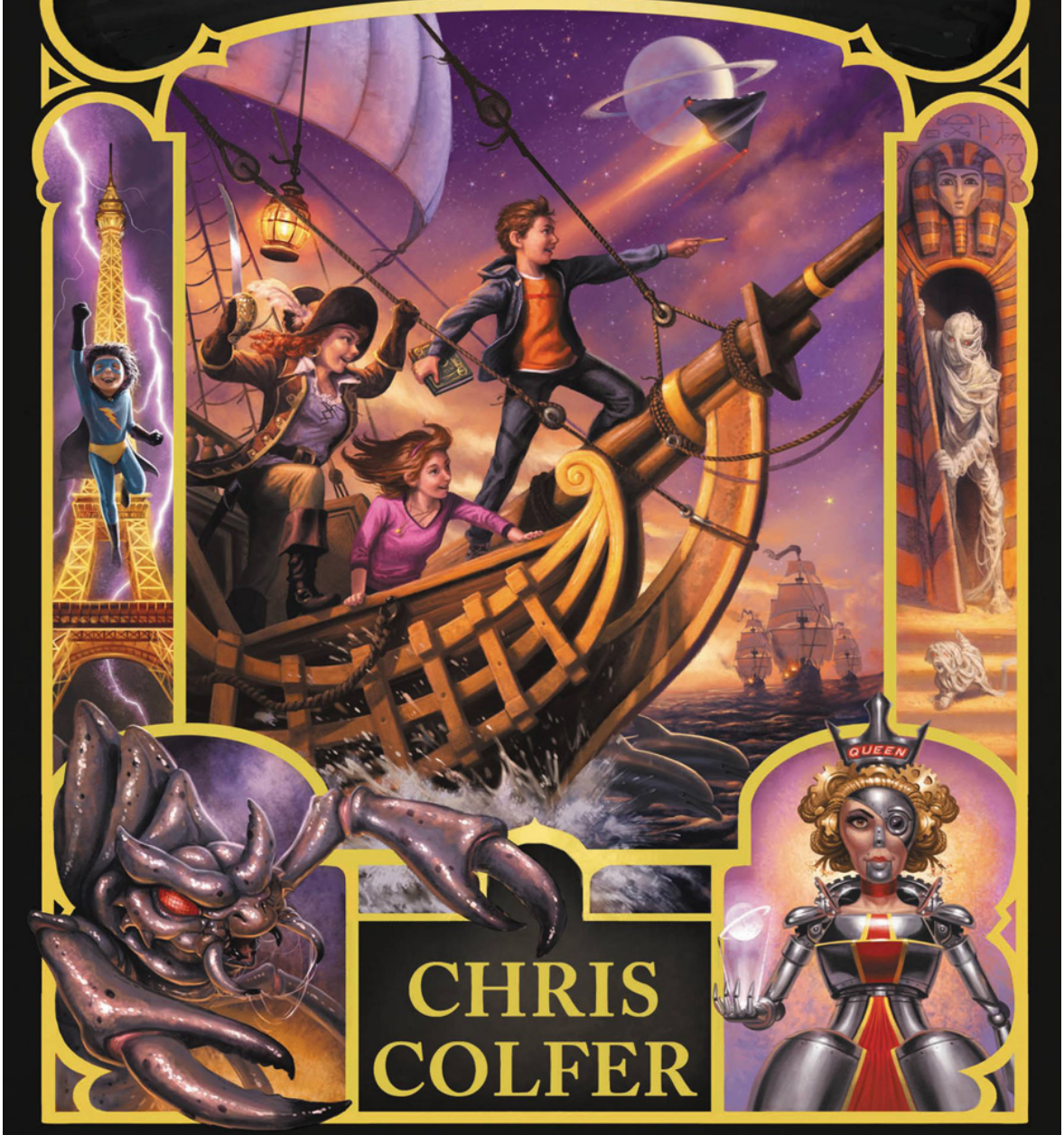
The Land of Stories

An Author's Odyssey



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The Land of Stories

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The Land of Stories

Worlds Collide

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Contents

COVER

TITLE PAGE

COPYRIGHT

DEDICATION

EPIGRAPH

PROLOGUE: A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

CHAPTER ONE: DISTRESS CALL FROM THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER TWO: ACCIDENTAL YET UNEXPLAINABLE

CHAPTER THREE: THE FROG IN THE MIRROR

CHAPTER FOUR: A SUBCONSCIOUS SURPRISE

CHAPTER FIVE: TURBULENCE AHEAD

CHAPTER SIX: PRISONERS OF THE MIRROR

CHAPTER SEVEN: PIZZA BAGELS AND BARRICADES

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE CALVIN COOLIDGE EXPRESS

CHAPTER NINE: THE SCARIEST VILLAIN OF ALL

CHAPTER TEN: THE WITCHES ARRIVE

CHAPTER ELEVEN: A MIRRORED ESCAPE

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE UNEXPECTED RESCUERS

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: SOMETHING'S COOKING

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE CURSED AND THE COURTEOUS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: BACKUP

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE TEARS OF MEDUSA
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: WORLDS COLLIDE
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: FAIRIES VS. WITCHES
CHAPTER NINETEEN: WAR OF THE WORLDS
CHAPTER TWENTY: TIMES SQUARE SQUARE-OFF
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: A BROTHER'S BURDEN
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: A SPECULATION STORY
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: A PRESIDENTIAL SURPRISE
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: HAPPILY EVER AFTER, AFTER ALL
EPILOGUE: DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?

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To Rob, Alla, and Alvina.

The Land of Stories would never have happened without your guidance, passion, and grammar lessons.

And to readers across the world.

I'll cherish the adventures we've shared for the rest of my life.

Thanks for being my happily ever after.

Let's never grow up together.

“IF YOU WANT A HAPPY ENDING, THAT DEPENDS, OF COURSE, ON WHERE YOU STOP YOUR STORY.”

—ORSON WELLES

HAPPY 80th Birthday
Mr. Bailey!

PROLOGUE

A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

Bookworm Paradise had never been so crowded. Over a thousand guests were cramped inside the bookstore's event space, until there were no more open chairs and no standing room left. A small stage was flooded with light and set with two chairs and two microphones for the evening's program. It was difficult to see over the row of journalists and photographers crouched in front of the stage, but the attendees were assured the press would only be there for the first few minutes of the event.

The multigenerational crowd had come to the bookstore to see their favorite author in the flesh. The guests fidgeted as they stood and squirmed in their seats as they anxiously waited for him to make his first public appearance in years. Not only were they there to celebrate the writer's five-decades-long career, but the event was also marking a very special day in the author's life. A colorful banner painted by students from the local elementary school hung above the stage that said HAPPY 80TH BIRTHDAY, MR. BAILEY!

Just as the bookstore promised, at eight o'clock sharp a man in a chic suit stepped onstage and the evening's festivities began.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Bookworm Paradise," the man said into a microphone. "I'm Gregory Quinn from the *New York Times Book Review* and I couldn't be more honored to be moderating tonight's event. We're all here to celebrate a man who has made the world a much more magical place, thanks to over a hundred published

works of children's fiction."

The crowd cheered at the mention of Mr. Bailey's accomplished career. All the author's books could be found in the audience as the guests held their favorite titles close to their hearts.

"As I look around the room, I'm very pleased to see such a diverse group of people," Mr. Quinn continued. "Mr. Bailey has always said his greatest accomplishment isn't the number of books he's written or the number of copies sold, but the rich diversity of his readership. I can't think of a better testament to his work than knowing it's enjoyed by families all over the world."

Many people in the audience placed a hand over their chests as they remembered the joy the author had brought them over the years. Some even became teary-eyed recalling what an impact Mr. Bailey's stories had had on their young lives. Luckily, they'd found his work when they needed a good story the most.

"It's hard to find someone who doesn't smile at the mention of his name," Mr. Quinn went on. "Mr. Bailey filled our childhoods with adventure and suspense, his characters taught us the difference between right and wrong, and his stories showed us that the imagination is the most powerful weapon in the world. You know someone is special when the whole world considers them family, so now, let's remind him just how special he is. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, please give a warm welcome to the one and only *Mr. Conner Jonathan Bailey*."

The seated guests leaped to their feet and the event space filled with thunderous applause. The photographers raised their cameras and covered the stage in quick pulsating flashes.

An adorable and skinny old man slowly made his way onto the stage and waved at the excited audience. He had big eyes the color of the sky and messy white hair that sat on his head like a fluffy cloud. He wore thick glasses, bright blue suspenders, and neon-red sneakers. From the way he dressed and the mischievous twinkle in his eyes, it was clear that Mr. Bailey was just as colorful as the characters in his books.

Mr. Quinn tried to help the author into his seat, but the old man waved the attempt off, insisting he didn't need assistance. Even after Mr. Bailey sat down, the crowd continued to shower him with their affectionate applause.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," Mr. Bailey said into his

microphone. “You’re too kind, but it’s probably best you stop clapping so we can get on with the show. I’m eighty years old—time is of the essence.”

The crowd laughed and took their seats, each sitting a little more on edge than before.

“We can’t thank you enough for joining us, Mr. Bailey,” Mr. Quinn said.

“I’m delighted to have the opportunity,” the author said. “And thank *you*, Mr. Quinn, for such a lovely introduction. I didn’t realize you were talking about me until I heard my full name. After all those compliments, I was afraid the store had booked the wrong Mr. Bailey.”

“The praise was all for you, sir,” the moderator reassured him. “First things first: Happy birthday! It’s such a privilege to celebrate this milestone with you.”

“You’ve got to dig deep to find dirt older than me,” Mr. Bailey joked. “It’s funny, when I was young there was nothing I looked forward to more than my birthday. Nowadays, with every passing year, I feel more and more like an expired can of beans that God forgot to toss out.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” Mr. Quinn said. “Every time I hear your name mentioned, it’s always followed with a comment about your impressive stamina. Do you have any secrets for staying in shape or how you keep your energy up?”

“As you get older, it’s important to select the shape you most identify with, and as you can see, I’ve chosen a squash,” Mr. Bailey teased. “When it comes to maintaining a good energy level, I simply make the most out of the four hours a day I’m awake.”

A cheeky grin spread across the author’s face, and the audience roared with laughter. They were pleased to hear him speak with the same trademark wit he wrote with.

“We’re also joined tonight by Mr. Bailey’s family,” Mr. Quinn said, and gestured to the people sitting in the front row. “Thank you for sharing your father and grandfather with us. Mr. Bailey, would you like to introduce your children and grandchildren?”

“I’d be happy to,” Mr. Bailey said. “That’s my older daughter, Elizabeth, her husband, Ben, and their daughter, Charlie. Next we have my son, Matthew, his husband, Henry, and their boys, Ayden and Grayson. Last but certainly not least, my daughter Carrie, her husband, Scott, and their children, Brighton, Sammy, and Levi. As you can see, they’re all adopted—

a bunch that good-looking couldn't possibly share my DNA."

The audience chuckled and gave the author's family a warm round of applause, forcing them to stand and wave bashfully.

"We were very saddened to hear of your wife's passing earlier this year," Mr. Quinn said. "As most of our audience knows, Mr. Bailey's wife, Breanne Campbell-Bailey, was also an accomplished writer and served as a United States senator for twenty-four years until her retirement."

"Would you believe we were middle school sweethearts?" Mr. Bailey said with a smile. "As far as I'm concerned, I was the first and only mistake she ever made."

"How long were you married?" Mr. Quinn asked.

"Fifty-two years," Mr. Bailey said. "She insisted on finishing her master's degree before marriage and publishing her fifth book before starting a family."

"I'm not surprised," Mr. Quinn said. "The late senator was a major advocate for women's rights."

"Yes, but I must clarify, Bree was never *late* for anything," the author said with a laugh. "She did absolutely everything on her own time, and her death was no exception. But in my family we don't say *died* or *passed away*, we say *returned to magic*—it suits her much better. Before she returned to magic, my wife hid thousands of notes in our home for me to find after she was gone. Not a day goes by I don't discover a Post-it reminding me to take my medicine or eat breakfast."

"Magic indeed," Mr. Quinn said. "You were both born and raised in Willow Crest, California. Is that correct?"

"That's right," Mr. Bailey said with a nod. "And what a different world it was. Paper came from trees, cars ran on gasoline, and caffeine was legal. It was practically the Dark Ages."

"Can you remember the first person who inspired you to write?" the moderator asked.

"It was my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Peters," the author said. "At first we didn't see eye-to-eye; she thought her classroom was a place for education, I thought it was a great place for naps. A year later she became principal of the middle school and read some short stories I had written for my English class. Mrs. Peters saw potential in my writing and planted the seeds in my head. I'll always be so grateful to her. I dedicated one of my

books to her—but I can't recall which one."

"It's *Fairytaletopia 4: The Literary Journey*!" shouted an excited little girl in the back row.

"Oh yes, that's the one," Mr. Bailey said, and scratched his head. "You'll have to be patient with me; my memory has been on vacation since my early seventies. These days I'll pick up a book and read the whole thing without realizing I wrote it."

"Speaking of which, let's talk about your remarkable writing career," Mr. Quinn said. "As I said before, you've published more than a hundred books over the course of five decades. Among those are the Starboardia sagas, the Adventures of Blimp Boy mysteries, the Galaxy Queen chronicles, the Ziblings graphic novels, and most notably, the Fairytaletopia series."

The crowd cheered the loudest at the mention of Mr. Bailey's fantasy series, Fairytaletopia. The author's six-book franchise was the most successful and acclaimed publication of his career. The series had been translated into fifty languages, was sold in over a hundred countries, and had helped improve children's literacy around the world. The Fairytaletopia books had also been adapted into several major motion pictures, a dozen television shows, and countless items of tacky merchandise.

"Although the majority of your work has been bestsellers and critical hits, you're most known for writing Fairytaletopia," Mr. Quinn said. "What is the special ingredient that makes that series so beloved?"

"That's an easy answer. It was written by a child," Mr. Bailey confessed. "Not many people know this, but I finished the first draft of *Fairytaletopia: The Wishing Charm* when I was about thirteen years old. I was very embarrassed about writing, so I kept it a secret; I didn't even show it to my family. Later, in my twenties, after a few mild literary successes, I came across a dusty old manuscript in my mother's attic. I brushed it off, fixed some typos, and had it published. Had I known what a hit it would be I would have pursued it much sooner."

"How interesting," Mr. Quinn said. "So you're saying the series is successful with children because it was conceived by one."

"Precisely," Mr. Bailey said. "Children will always be drawn to stories written in their own language. And as children's authors, it's our job never to lose touch with that language."

“You’ve had plenty of opportunities to write for adults, but you’ve always stayed in the realm of middle grade. Why do you enjoy writing for children?”

“I suppose I just like children more than I like adults,” the author said with a shameless shrug. “No matter how much the world evolves, the children of the world will never change. Every child is born with the same need for love, respect, and understanding. They’re unified by the same fears, compassion, and convictions. They’re tormented by an endless curiosity, a thirst for knowledge, and a desire for adventure. The greatest tragedy in life is how soon children get robbed of these qualities. We could accomplish great things if we held on to such a fresh point of view. Think about how wonderful this world could be if we all saw it through the eyes of a child.”

“What would your advice be for aspiring authors?” Mr. Quinn asked.

It was a very important question to the author, and he went silent for a moment while he thought of a worthy answer.

“Always let the world inspire and influence you, but never let it discourage you. In fact, the more the world discourages you, the more it needs you. As writers we have the profound privilege and responsibility to create a new world when the current one takes a turn for the worse. Storytellers are more than just entertainers; we’re the shepherds of ideology, the street pavers of progress, and the scientists of the soul. If it weren’t for people like us, who imagine a better world and are brave enough to question and stand up to the authorities that suppress them… well, we’d still be living in the Dark Ages I was born into.”

It became so quiet the crowd could hear the ticking of a clock. At first the author was afraid he had said something to upset the audience, but once they’d had a few seconds to process his words, the event space erupted into another thunderous round of applause.

“I’m afraid to follow that answer with another question, so why don’t we open the questions to our audience members?” Mr. Quinn proposed.

Nearly all the hands in the room shot up at once. Mr. Bailey chuckled at the sight, tickled by how many people wanted to ask a question of an old geezer like him.

“Let’s start with the woman in the brown shirt,” Mr. Quinn said.

“The Starboardia series is much darker than most of your work,

especially the history about American slavery. Were you worried that might be too much for your younger audience?"

"Not once," Mr. Bailey said. "I will never sugarcoat history so that certain people sleep better at night. The more we shed light on the problems of the world, past and present, the easier it will be to fix them."

"Now let's go to the boy in the front," Mr. Quinn said.

"How many of your characters are based on yourself?"

"All of them—especially the villains," Mr. Bailey said with a wink.

"Now we'll go to the young man in the middle," Mr. Quinn said.

"What inspired you to write the Fairytaletopia series?"

The mischievous twinkle in the author's eye grew so bright, it practically shined like a searchlight.

"Would you believe me if I told you it was all autobiographical?" he said.

The crowd giggled, and Mr. Bailey's children collectively sighed at their father's remark—not *this* again. However, Mr. Bailey's twinkle never faded. He looked around the room as if he was disappointed the audience wasn't taking the answer as seriously as the others.

"It's true," he said with conviction. "This world is full of magic if you choose to see it, but it's a choice I can't make for you."

The comment inspired a little girl in the third row to stand on her seat and wave her hand energetically in the air. Whatever her question was, she was more desperate to ask it than anyone else in the room.

"Yes, the young lady wearing pigtails," Mr. Quinn said.

"Hello, Mr. Bailey," she said. "My name is Annie and I love your books. I've read all six Fairytaletopia books a dozen times each."

"I appreciate that more than words could describe," the author said. "What's your question?"

"Well, it has to do with what you just said, about Fairytaletopia being true," she said. "Everyone knows Fairytaletopia is about a pair of twins who travel into the fairy-tale world, but I bet a lot of people don't know you're a twin yourself. I looked you up online and saw you have a sister named Alex. So I assume you based Alec and Connie Baxter from Fairytaletopia on you and your sister."

The question took Mr. Bailey off guard. His readers were usually so invested in the worlds he wrote about that they rarely asked him questions

about his personal life, especially ones about his family.

"That is both creepy and correct, Annie," Mr. Bailey said. "I'd say you have what it takes to be a private investigator some—"

"That's not my question," the girl said. "According to my research, Alex Bailey attended school in Willow Crest until the seventh grade, but then she vanishes from all public records. I've looked everywhere but can't find a single document about where she went or what became of her after that. So I guess my question is less about the books and more about your sister. Whatever happened to Alex?"

The world-renowned author went dead silent and the twinkle faded from his eye. He was shocked, not because of the question, but because he couldn't remember the answer. He searched every corner of his patchy memory, but he couldn't recall where his sister was or the last time he had spoken to her. The only memories coming to mind were from when Alex was a teenager, but he refused to believe that was the last time he'd seen her. He was certain he'd had some communication with Alex since then. She couldn't just have disappeared, as the girl in pigtails claimed… or could she?

"I… I…" Mr. Bailey mumbled as he tried to focus.

It was obvious something was wrong, and the crowd began to shift in their seats. When the author realized his audience was growing uncomfortable, he laughed at their reactions like he was only playing a joke on them.

"Well, it's a simple answer," he said. "What happened to Connie at the end of Fairytaletopia?"

He phrased the question like he was playing a trivia game with the young girl—but secretly, the author couldn't remember the conclusion of his beloved series, either. Trying to recall the whereabouts of his sister made him realize how much information was missing from his memory.

"She and Alec both had a happily ever after," Annie said.

"Did they?" the author asked. "I mean, *of course* they did! Then *that's* your answer."

"But, Mr. Bailey—"

"Well, this has been a wonderful evening, but I have to cut it short," the author said. "I would love to stay and answer all your questions, but my four hours of consciousness are almost up."

The author yawned and stretched like he was tired, but it wasn't a convincing performance. In truth, the mental void had terrified him, and he didn't know how much longer he could keep his fear from surfacing. Mr. Bailey always made jokes about his fading memory, but it wasn't until tonight that he'd realized it wasn't a laughing matter.

Later that evening, once his children had dropped him off at home and made sure he was settled, Mr. Bailey searched his house for any clues he could find leading to his sister's location, but he found nothing—not even a photograph. His children already treated him like a toddler, so he was afraid to ask one of them what had happened to her. For peace of mind, he had to find her on his own.

The author could envision every detail of his sister's face. Her pale skin, her rosy cheeks, her pale blue eyes, the freckles on the bridge of her nose, and her long strawberry-blonde hair were instantly accessible every time he closed his eyes and thought of her. However, this was how Alex had looked in her youth. She most certainly would have been an old woman by now—so why couldn't he picture it?

"Oh, Alex, where did you go?" he said to himself.

Mr. Bailey knew only one thing could jump-start his memory. He locked himself in his study and searched his bookshelves until he found copies of the Fairytaletopia series. Just as he'd told the audience at the bookstore, all six books were based on true events he and his sister had experienced when they were much younger. If he couldn't recall the information on his own, perhaps one of his stories would trigger the memories for him.

Mr. Bailey eagerly pulled the first Fairytaletopia book off the shelf, but remembering the events that inspired each book wasn't as easy as he thought it would be.

"Think, old man, think!" he said. "*Fairytaletopia: The Wishing Charm* was about our first trip to the fairy-tale world…. We were collecting something…. There were things we needed to get back home.… *Oh, I know—the Wishing Spell!* Our dad's journal helped us navigate and find all the items! We were chased by the Big Bad Wolf Pack and barely survived our encounter with the Evil Queen! That's also the year we met Froggy, Red, Jack, and Goldilocks!"

The old man was so excited to retrieve these memories that he jumped in the air and his back cracked, reminding him he was too old to be doing such

movements. He put the first book in his series aside and moved on to the sequel.

"Fairytaletopia 2: The Evil Fairy's Revenge," he read. "What on earth was that about? *Wait, that was the year the Enchantress returned!* We flew all over the fairy-tale world in a flying ship called the *Granny*! Alex defeated the Enchantress by taking away her pride! Boy, was she brilliant for doing that. That was the same year we met Mother Goose and Mom married Bob."

The second remembrance gave him a boost of confidence, and he eagerly moved on to the third book in the series.

"Fairytaletopia 3: The Long-Lost Army," he read. "*That must be based on the Grande Armée that tried conquering the fairy-tale world!* The soldiers were trapped in a portal for over two hundred years, thanks to Mother Goose and the Brothers Grimm! Our uncle joined them and found a dragon egg! He raised the beast and our grandmother slayed it right before she returned to magic! Wow, I can't believe our mother let us out of the house after that one."

As he moved on to the fourth and fifth books, the memories began to flow so freely he had trouble keeping up with them. It was like a tropical rainstorm had formed in the middle of a terrible drought.

"*Fairytaletopia 4: The Literary Journey* was when Alex and I chased Uncle Lloyd through the worlds of classic literature! We would have stopped him sooner if he hadn't separated us into Camelot and Robin Hood. *Fairytaletopia 5: A Storyteller's Quest* was when we traveled into my short stories! We accidentally went inside Bree's writing, and our uncle Lloyd was trapped in the Cemetery of the Undead! We rushed back to the hospital to tell Alex what had happened, but when we arrived, she was gone…."

The author pulled the sixth and final book in his series off his shelf and stared down at the cover.

"Fairytaletopia 6: The Great New York Adventure," he read.

Unfortunately, the title didn't trigger a memory like the rest of the books had. Mr. Bailey tried as hard as he could to remember what the book was about and the events that had inspired it, but he drew a blank at every turn. The answer might have escaped him completely, but he knew that the information he craved was somewhere inside the book. Even if he had misled his readers to a false happy ending, he was certain he could read

between the lines and discover the truth.

So the beloved children's book author took a deep breath, opened his own book to the very first page, and began reading, hoping with all his heart that the story would remind him where his sister had gone all those years ago….

CHAPTER ONE

DISTRESS CALL FROM THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

It was a typical afternoon at the main branch of the New York Public Library. The marble halls of the world-famous structure echoed with the footsteps of obnoxious tourists, restless college students, and noisy groups of elementary school students on field trips. Tour guides shared little-known facts about the library's expansive history and refrained from rolling their eyes at questions about the movies that had been filmed there. Librarians gave directions to the renowned reading rooms on the upper floors and reminded the guests that library books weren't allowed in the bathrooms.

There was absolutely nothing to suggest that anything strange or peculiar might occur later that evening, but strange and peculiar events rarely give any warning before they happen.

Security guard Rudy Lewis began his four-PM-to-midnight shift by patrolling the library's entrance on Fifth Avenue. He yelled at teenagers for climbing Patience and Fortitude, the iconic lion statues that flanked the library's sprawling front steps. He kindly asked the homeless people sleeping beside the fountains to continue their naps at the shelter down the street, and once they obliged, he went *back* to the statues to yell at a new gang of teenagers for climbing them. Once the library closed and was cleared out, Rudy spent the rest of his shift patrolling the interior.

For hours and hours Rudy walked up and down the vacant halls of the four-level structure, inspecting its various forums, galleries, studies, and

stairwells. Five minutes before the end of his shift, he was positive there wasn't another soul in the library and was eager to hand his duties off to the next security guard. But as he made his final inspection of the third floor, Rudy discovered he was mistaken.

At the end of a long, dark hallway, the security guard found a young woman standing alone. She wore a sparkling white dress and had strawberry-blonde hair, and her head was bowed as if she had fallen asleep standing up. At first, the sight of the young woman startled Rudy. He had walked past this part of the library a dozen times and hadn't seen anyone before now. It was like the young woman had appeared out of thin air.

"Excuse me," he said. "What are you doing?"

The young woman didn't respond.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," Rudy said.

The angry security guard shined his flashlight on the young woman to get her attention, but she didn't move. Once she was illuminated, Rudy could see that she was trembling and her skin was as pale as a ghost's. For a split second, he worried that she *was* a ghost. His co-workers had always warned him that the library was haunted, but until now, he'd had no reason to believe them.

"The library's closed." Rudy's voice cracked as he spoke. "Unless you're an employee, you're trespassing on city property."

Still the young woman neither looked up nor said a word. Her silence was making Rudy paranoid. The longer he stood in her presence, the creepier the young woman became. The fate of every security guard in every horror film flashed before Rudy's eyes, but he mustered the courage to approach the strange young woman.

"I'm gonna call the police if you don't say something!"

Suddenly, the young woman gasped and jerked her head up, causing Rudy to jump. She frantically looked around in a panic as if waking from a bad dream.

"Where am I?" she panted.

"You're at the library," Rudy said, but that only confused her more.

"The library? *Which* library?"

"The New York Public Library at Fifth Avenue and East Forty-Second Street," Rudy said.

"Oh no!" the young woman cried. "You have to get out of here!

Something terrible is about to happen!"

"What are you talking about? How did you even get in here?"

"I don't know what she has planned, but you've got to go before she makes me hurt you!" the young woman pleaded. *"Please, you have to listen to me! I can't control it!"*

Tears spilled out of her blue eyes and rolled down her face.

"Who are you talking about?" Rudy asked. "No one is in here but me and you."

"The witch who cursed me! She put me under some kind of spell that makes me do things—awful things!"

"Lady, you're clearly on a lot of drugs," Rudy said. "I'm taking you outside and calling the cops."

"You have to get my brother! He's the only one who can help! His name is Conner Bailey—he should be at Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital in Willow Crest—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Rudy said, and grabbed her arm. "This city is full of places that help people like you, but you can't stay here."

The security guard tried to escort her to the exit, but the young woman wouldn't budge. He pulled on her arm with all his might, but she stayed exactly where she was, as if she were glued to the floor.

"It's too late!" the young woman said. "The spell—I feel it coming! The witch must be close! *Please, you have to run!*"

To the security guard's horror, the young woman's eyes rolled back and began to glow. Her hair rose above her head and floated in the air like a slow-flickering fire. In all his years in security, Rudy had never seen anything like this before.

"What the heck is happening to you?"

The young woman placed a palm on his chest, and a bright blast erupted from her hand, knocking him all the way down the hall. As Rudy lay on the floor, his whole body tingled as if he had just been electrocuted. His vision was blurry and fading fast. With all his remaining strength and in the few moments of consciousness he had left, Rudy reached for his radio and held it against his mouth.

"*Police…*" he wheezed. *"We need police at the library… NOW!"*

Within minutes, Fifth Avenue was illuminated by red and blue lights as two police cars sped toward the library. A policeman emerged from the first

vehicle and a policewoman from the second. The officers hurried up the front steps with their guns raised.

"I just got the call. What's the situation?" the policewoman asked.

"We don't know," said the policeman. "A distress call came from somewhere inside the library. Approach with caution."

"Oh my God." The policewoman gasped. *"Look!"*

The officer pointed to the library's entrance as the large doors slowly opened on their own. A moment later the young woman in the white dress levitated through the doorway and landed at the top of the library's front steps. Even in New York City, the police weren't accustomed to seeing someone with glowing eyes and floating hair flying out of a building. Once the initial shock faded, the officers knelt behind a lion statue and aimed their weapons at her.

"Hands up!" the policeman ordered.

The young woman didn't follow his instructions. Instead, she pointed at the statues and two powerful bolts of lightning struck the lions. The police dived to the ground to avoid getting hit.

"What was that?" the policeman asked.

"Lightning!" said the policewoman. "But I don't understand. There aren't any clouds in the sky!"

Once the officers helped each other to their feet, they jerked their heads toward a strange cracking noise coming from the statues. They watched in astonishment as the stone lions stood up from their perches, leaped into the air, and landed on the steps in front of the young woman, blocking the officers from coming any closer. The statues roared so loudly, they set off all the car alarms within a block.

"Holy crap," the policeman said. "*The statues are alive!* How is this possible?"

The policewoman clicked the radio on her shoulder. "Officer Sanchez to Dispatch," she said. "The library is under attack, I repeat, the library is under attack! We need all available units to join us immediately!"

"Copy, Officer Sanchez," a voice responded over the radio. "All available units have been notified. Are you able to identify who or what is behind the attack?"

Still in disbelief, the policewoman hesitated to respond.

"It's *magic*," she said breathlessly. *"The library is being attacked by*

magic!”

CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION

Chapter Two

ACCIDENTAL YET UNEXPLAINABLE

The Willow Crest Fire Department had never seen an incident like the one at Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital. The firefighters were called in the middle of the night to view the damage from a reported explosion, but when they arrived, they had no idea what they were looking at. There weren't any flames to extinguish, there was hardly any debris to clear, and the remaining walls of the hospital weren't blackened or singed by the alleged blast. As far as they could tell, the women's bathroom hadn't *exploded* as much as it had *vanished*.

"It's not damaged, it's just *missing*," one firefighter said to another. "If there had been an explosion, this place would be covered in bits of porcelain, but there's not a piece of the bathroom anywhere."

"The hospital staff swears a fully functional bathroom was right here just a few hours ago," the second firefighter said. "If it wasn't an explosion, what could have removed it so quickly?"

The firefighters asked around the hospital, but no one had witnessed the phenomenon, further complicating the strange situation. They checked the grounds surrounding the hospital in case the bathroom had been detached by some type of tractor, but there were no tracks on the ground.

"What should I put on the report?" the first firefighter asked the second. "The hospital's insurance company is going to need something from us, but I can't exactly say the bathroom got up and walked away."

“Write *accidental yet unexplainable*,” the second firefighter said. “I think this case is above our pay grade. They’re going to need an investigation to get to the bottom of this—a *thorough* investigation.”

With no further assessments to make, the firefighters taped off the area and gave the hospital manager the contact information for a destruction investigator who lived in the next town. The specialist wasn’t available for another week, so the missing bathroom remained a giant and mysterious hole until his arrival.

The scene was completely untouched until midnight on the eve of the inspector’s visit. A fifteen-year-old young man stepped over the yellow tape and had a seat in the doorway that led to nowhere. His eyes were baggy, his heart was heavy, and he hunched as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. Deep in thought, he gazed through the large hole at the buildings of downtown Willow Crest in the distance.

The young man had hoped that if he returned to the missing bathroom, it might provide answers to the questions haunting him. Unfortunately, all the answers had disappeared with the bathroom.

“Hey, Conner!”

A sixteen-year-old young woman suddenly peeked into the hospital from outside, almost giving Conner a heart attack. She wore a purple beanie and had blonde hair with a streak of pink and blue at the front.

“Bree!” Conner said. “What are you doing here? I thought you were grounded for running away.”

“Oh, I *am*,” Bree said. “I’m not allowed to leave the house until college. I’ve never seen my parents so furious. As far as they know, I just snuck off to visit family in Connecticut. I can’t imagine how they’d react if they knew we flew to Germany and back.”

“What if you get caught sneaking out?” Conner asked.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Bree said. “I’ve been sneaking out of the house since I was eight. I put a wax head on my pillow and leave a cassette playing of someone snoring in case my parents check my bedroom.”

“That’s both impressive and scary,” Conner said.

Bree shrugged. “It’s just like Laurel Thatcher Ulrich said. *‘Well-behaved women seldom make history.’”*

She climbed into the hospital, carefully stepping on the remaining floorboards so she didn’t fall into the basement below, and had a seat next

to Conner in the doorway.

"You weren't home, so I figured I'd find you here," she said.

"I wanted to take one last look at the damage before the inspector starts digging around tomorrow," he said. "You know, just in case there was something we missed."

"Any luck finding Alex?"

"Not at all," Conner said with a sigh. "It's been a week since she disappeared and we haven't found a single clue to where she went. My mom and stepdad have looked all over town, but there's no sign of her. Jack, Red, and Lester are searching the fairy-tale world as we speak, but so far they haven't returned with anything."

"It's so bizarre," Bree said. "I barely know her, but it seems so out of character for her to run off like that. Has she done anything like this before?"

Conner's knee-jerk reaction was to defend his sister's reputation, but the more he thought about it, the more he remembered it wasn't entirely unlike her to go missing.

"Sort of," he recalled. "Alex went through this weird phase not too long ago. She would get overwhelmed about something and lose control of her powers. But the circumstances were so different—she was really stressed out and easy to provoke."

"What was she stressed out about?"

"It was back when we were searching the fairy-tale world for our uncle Lloyd," he explained. "All her hunches about him were right, but no one wanted to believe her. The Fairy Council thought she was becoming reckless, so they ordered her to stop looking for him. Alex got so upset, she disappeared into a ball of flames, but she resurfaced a couple of days later."

"Oh," Bree said. "So maybe it *isn't* out of character."

"Disappearing, maybe, but she's not the type who abandons her friends in their hour of need," Conner said. "Things were finally looking up for a change. We had *just* recruited all the characters from my stories. We were *finally* ready to fight the Literary Army in the fairy-tale world. So why would she vanish now? It makes no sense."

"The detective in me wants to believe your uncle had something to do with it, especially if he was the reason behind her previous outbursts," Bree said. "But Emmerich and I were with him the entire time he was in the

Otherworld. Alex never laid eyes on him. If she was provoked, it was by someone else."

Conner nodded. "And that's what I've been trying to figure out."

Alex's behavior puzzled them as much as the vanished bathroom puzzled the fire department, and just like the firefighters, they knew they were missing a piece of the story. Unfortunately, there was no specialist *they* could call to help them solve Alex's disappearance.

"How are all the characters doing?" Bree asked.

"They're a little stir-crazy from being cooped up in the commissary," Conner said. "We have to let them outside for fresh air in shifts so no one around here gets suspicious. Bob has been teaching the Merry Men and the Lost Boys how to play football at the park to burn off some energy. My mom has rewrapped all the mummies with fresh bandages, so the commissary smells a lot better. The Cyborgs have blown every fuse in the hospital from using the outlets too much. The Ziblings have been patrolling downtown at night to get their hero fix, so the city's crime rate has gone down. And the Starboardia pirates found a television and have been watching *I Love Lucy* reruns non-stop—it annoys everyone else, but at least it keeps them occupied."

"I'm glad everyone's hanging in there," Bree said. "I can't imagine what it's like for you. Being in the Cemetery of the Undead for a couple of hours was surreal enough for me, but you've been surrounded by your creations for days. It's got to feel like a trippy family reunion."

"Once you've seen your elderly grandmother slay a dragon, everything else pales in comparison." Conner laughed. "Speaking of family reunions, did Cornelia and Emmerich get to Germany safely? It was so kind of her to offer him a ride home."

"Thankfully," Bree said. "Cornelia said Emmerich and Frau Himmelsbach were very happy to be reunited. They're also moving to Australia to get as far away from Neuschwanstein Castle as possible. Wanda and Frenda had been stranded in Bavaria since your uncle Lloyd kidnapped us, so Cornelia picked them up and they flew back to Connecticut yesterday."

"I was amazed at how well Cornelia handled it all," Conner said. "Usually people freak out when they learn about other dimensions, but she barely flinched."

Bree forced a smile and nodded—she hadn't been completely honest with Conner. He knew Bree was in Connecticut when she learned Emmerich had been kidnapped, he knew Cornelia had generously offered to fly Bree to Germany so they could help Emmerich's mother look for him, and he knew they happened to be in Neuschwanstein Castle when Uncle Lloyd brought Emmerich back to the Otherworld. However, Conner had been so overwhelmed by Alex's disappearance, Bree thought it was best to leave out the other details.

She never mentioned *why* she had gone to visit her family in Connecticut—that she'd discovered they were part of a secret league known as the Sisters Grimm, or their extensive history of tracking portals into the fairy-tale world. Bree hoped a better time would present itself to fill Conner in, but the longer Alex was gone, the more inappropriate it became.

"At Cornelia's age, there's not a whole lot that shocks her," Bree said. "In fact, when you get a minute, I'd love to tell you more about my trip to her—"

Bree was interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming from the hallway behind them. A moment later, Trollbella appeared in the doorway of the missing bathroom. The young troll queen immediately crossed her arms and scowled at the sight of Bree and Conner in the same location.

"Well, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't keep her away from your man," Trollbella quipped.

Conner rolled his eyes. "What do you want, Trollbella?"

"I came to let you know that Beansprout, the Frog Mistress, and Plucky McGee have returned," she said.

"Who?" Bree asked.

"She means that Jack, Red, and Lester are back from the fairy-tale world," Conner said, and quickly jumped to his feet. "Maybe they know something about Alex! Trollbella, will you let my mom and Bob know? They're working a night shift on the third floor."

"I am *not* your errand girl, Butterboy," Trollbella said. "There'll be no more favors between us until you're ready to commit."

"Fine," Conner said. "*Bree*, will you please get my mom and Bob—"

"*Fine*, I'll fetch my Butter-in-laws," Trollbella said. "But please stop begging—I hate seeing how vulnerable you've become without me."

Conner and Bree ran down the hall toward the commissary as Trollbella

fetched Charlotte and Bob. They found all their friends from Oz, Neverland, the Sherwood Forest, *The Land of Stories*, and Conner's short stories "The Adventures of Blimp Boy," "The Ziblings," and "Galaxy Queen" huddled around Jack and Red. The only ones who weren't paying attention to their arrival were the pirates from "Starboardia," who never looked away from the television.

"Are they *still* watching that ditzy woman?" Red asked. "The Otherworld may be advanced, but it sure leads to some awful habits."

"Well?" Conner asked, getting straight to the point. "Did you find my sister?"

Jack slowly shook his head. "No," he said. "We looked at all the places we thought she would be—the ruins of the Fairy Palace, the Giant's Castle in the sky, the clock tower of the Charming Palace—but we didn't find a trace of her."

The news was so disappointing, Conner had to sit down. If Alex wasn't in the fairy-tale world, he didn't know where else to look. His train of thought shifted from thinking of places she might be to worrying she'd never be found.

"I'm sorry you didn't find Alex, but I'm so glad you're back," Goldilocks told Jack as she cradled their newborn son. "It's a miracle you weren't spotted, even at Lester's heights."

Jack went to his wife's side and kissed Hero on the forehead. Red gave Goldilocks a large hug from behind, as if the sentiment were meant for her.

"Goldilocks, you're back on your feet!" Red pointed out. "Is it safe for you to be walking again so soon after giving birth?"

"Red, I had a baby, not a whale," Goldilocks said. "How is the fairy-tale world? Are the conditions any better?"

"It's exactly as we left it," Jack told the room. "The citizens from all the kingdoms are still being held in Swan Lake, if they're not building monuments to the emperors. The Literary Army is lined up on the lawns of the Northern Palace, but all they do is march all day—as if they're waiting for something to happen."

"It sounds like they're preparing for battle," Goldilocks said. "They couldn't be expecting us, could they?"

"I imagine it's just a scare tactic to keep the citizens from rebelling," Jack said. "They still haven't discovered the royal families in the abandoned

mine, so I doubt they've caught wind of us. How could they?"

"And the others in the mine? Are they still… *made of stone*?" Goldilocks asked.

"Unfortunately so," Jack said. "Same goes for the Fairy Council."

"Oh, it was a terrible sight!" Red said, and shuddered at the thought. "All their faces were frozen in the most unattractive expressions of terror. If someone turns me into stone, I hope they have the decency to tell me something amusing beforehand."

"What about the creature that did it?" the Tin Woodman asked. "Was there any sign of who or what it is?"

"They wouldn't be here if they had seen it," Blubo said, and recalled the terrifying moments he had spent in its presence. "All it took was one glance, and *boom!* Everyone went stiff as a rock. I wouldn't be here if my eyes hadn't been closed."

Commander Newters gulped fearfully and turned to Conner. "There are creatures that turn others into stone in the Land of Stories?" he asked.

"It didn't come from the fairy-tale world," Conner said. "It must have been a character my uncle recruited using the Portal Potion—I just don't know which story it's from."

"Does it have to be from literature?" Beau Rogers asked. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were talking about Medusa from Greek mythology."

"What's a Medusa?" Peter Pan asked.

"She's a *horrible* monster," Beau Rogers animatedly replied. "Legend says she has a long, scaly body, fangs, and snakes for hair! Just one gaze into her red eyes will turn you into a statue!"

The Lost Boys covered their eyes, ears, and mouths at the young archaeologist's frightening description. The Blissworm clapped its tiny hands together, anxious to meet her.

"DON'T WORRY, LADS," Robin Hood said. "I'VE COURTED MANY A MAIDEN WHO TURNED OUT TO BE FAR WORSE. WITH JUST A FEW VERSES OF A ROMANTIC POEM, SHE WILL BE PUTTY IN MY HANDS."

The Prince of Thieves didn't make anyone feel better about the situation, especially Conner. He got to his feet and started pacing around the room. A very difficult decision had to be made, and Conner couldn't delay it a

moment longer.

"We can't waste any more time," he said. "Tomorrow we're going to fight the Literary Army and reclaim the fairy-tale world. I never thought we'd have to do it without my sister, but we can't let the people suffer any longer."

"Poor Alex," Red said. "There have been many times I've disappeared for some me time, but I always return after a couple of hours. I hope she'll resurface in time to help us. She put so much work into recruiting our army—it'd be a shame if she missed the war completely."

Suddenly, Goldilocks's face lit up with an idea. Red's nonsense always had a funny way of putting things into perspective for her.

"Hold your horses," Goldilocks said.

"Which horses?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"No, it's a figure of speech," Goldilocks said, and got back to her point. "We've been looking at the Literary Army and at Alex's disappearance like they're separate situations, but what if they're more related than we think? After all, we're *at war*—a war Alex is a key player in. It's very possible someone is using Alex to sabotage us. Perhaps it's time we stop asking *where Alex went* and start asking *who took her*."

Of all the directions Conner's mind had gone in the last week, this was a conclusion he'd never come to. His sister was so powerful and strong-minded; it was hard to imagine that someone could abduct her from the hospital without anyone noticing, especially someone from the Literary Army.

"They couldn't have taken Alex," Conner said. "Even if the Literary Army knew we existed, they have no way of accessing the Otherworld. Besides, I think one of us would have noticed a card soldier or flying monkey walking around."

"I didn't say it was the Literary Army," Goldilocks said. "In times of conflict, there's always the enemy *you know* and the enemy *you don't*. The Literary Army may be who we're up against, but who's the third party we're forgetting to consider? Who else would benefit if either of our armies was defeated?"

The whole commissary went quiet as all the characters thought it over. It was highly likely that they were leaving someone out of their equation, but who could it be? Who or what was just as invested in the upcoming war as

they were? Who at that very moment was also assembling in secret and forming plans to dominate the fairy-tale world?

The answer hit Bree like a bolt of lightning. The realization made her gasp so loudly, all the characters jumped.

"I know!" she exclaimed. "We're forgetting about *the witches*! We know they have access to the Otherworld because one of them kidnapped Emmerich using the portal at Neuschwanstein Castle!"

"I think you're onto something!" Jack said. "Conner, do you remember the night we followed the Masked Man to the Witches' Brew? The witches were meeting because they were afraid they'd get blamed for the missing children—they were paranoid a witch hunt was coming. It's very likely they began plotting to take over the fairy-tale world as a way to protect themselves."

"Then the Masked Man invaded with the Literary Army," Goldilocks said. "The witches probably kidnapped Emmerich so they would have leverage against your uncle, so maybe they plan to use Alex as leverage against *us*!"

"Of course the witches are up to some vile scheme," Red said. "I mean, *they're witches*—hello! I wouldn't be surprised if that goat who took Charlie had something to do with it! The Lost Boys and I found the missing children in *her* basement—Morina probably kidnapped them to purposely stir up paranoia in the witch community so they had a *reason* to plot a takeover! I bet *she's* behind the whole thing!"

Everyone froze and looked at Red in shock. If she was correct, it was a little unsettling how easy it was for her to figure out Morina's intentions.

"Don't look at me like that," Red said. "It takes a conniving genius to know a conniving genius. Obviously, there's a type of woman Charlie's attracted to."

"But how could the witches know we're planning to defeat the Literary Army? How do they know *we're* a threat?" Conner asked.

Bree looked at him like the answer was obvious.

"Conner, they figured out Emmerich was your cousin before you or your uncle did," she reminded him. "I'm sure it wouldn't be hard for a witch to look into a crystal ball and figure out what we're doing with a bunch of interdimensional beings inside a children's hospital!"

Unfortunately, it made sense. A witch could easily have crossed into the

Otherworld and snuck into the hospital without being detected. They could have used magic to overpower Alex and take her back to the fairy-tale world as a hostage. Conner had prayed for a clear answer all week, but he'd never guessed how much it would complicate matters.

"Let's lay everything out on the table before we go any further," he said.

"Which table?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"*Also* a figure of speech," Conner said. "Not only do we have to liberate the fairy-tale world from the scariest villains in literature and slay a mythological creature before it turns us all into stone, but we also have to defeat an evil coven of witches before they use my sister against us."

All the characters in the commissary shared glances with wide, timid eyes. The Blissworm cheered—it couldn't wait for the battles to begin.

"I know what you're thinking," Conner said. "This is a much different fight than you signed up for. If the witches are involved, then we're easily outnumbered, especially if they have my sister. I was confident we could defeat the Literary Army, but I'm not sure we can win the war."

Conner rubbed his hands together, desperately trying to think of a way to get the odds back in their favor. Jack had a seat beside him and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"For once, I'm with the Blissworm," Jack said. "We've seen a lot of scary situations over the years, but we've always gotten through them together. Yes, there were many times when a little of your sister's magic went a long way, but we would never have pulled through if it weren't for *both* of you. Now look around, Conner—you're surrounded by an army from *your* imagination! That means there's a piece of you inside each and every one of them, and even if it's just a fraction of your bravery, your aptitude, or even your wit—I know those bastards won't stand a chance against us."

It was the exact pep talk Conner needed to hear, and it also inspired all the characters in the commissary. Jack's words even made the pirates of "Starboardia" look up from the television for the first time in days.

"It'll be dangerous," Conner said.

"We love danger!" the Lost Boys shouted.

"Some of us may get hurt," Conner added.

"Speak for yourself," the Cyborg Queen said. "I can adjust *feelings* in Settings."

“And regardless of what happens, at the end of the day, we’ll all be heroes!” Bolt said, and flipped through the air.

Conner couldn’t help but smile at his characters’ willingness to help him. He’d never thought his own creations could inspire him so much.

“All right, all right,” he said. “It’s going to be a challenge, but we can do this. Tomorrow morning we’re going to go into the fairy-tale world and we’re gonna kick some Literary-Mythological-Witchy butt!”

All the characters cheered. The Blissworm was happy they were finally on the same page.

“DID YOU HEAR THAT, MEN?” Robin Hood said. “WE’RE ON THE EVE OF WAR! WE SHALL FOLLOW THE SORCERER VALIANTLY INTO BATTLE AND WILL BE SHOWERED WITH RICHES AFTER OUR VICTORY!”

“Robin, no one is getting paid,” Conner said.

“OH,” Robin Hood said. “THEN WE SHALL BE SHOWERED WITH COMPLIMENTS FOR OUR GOOD INTENTIONS! AFTER ALL, PRAISE IS THE CURRENCY OF THE BRAVE!”

Suddenly, the doors opened and Bob and Charlotte rushed into the commissary. They were flushed and out of breath, as if they’d run the whole way there. A moment later, Trollbella entered behind them—they had moved so fast, she couldn’t keep up.

“Mom, I’ve got good news and bad news,” Conner said. “The bad news is Jack and Red didn’t find Alex, but the good news is—”

“We know where your sister is!” Charlotte panted.

Conner couldn’t believe his ears. “You *what*?”

“Turn on the news!” Bob told the pirates. *“Channel Four! Hurry!”*

“But Ricky just let Lucy perform in his club!” Auburn Sally said.

“CHANGE THE CHANNEL!” the entire room yelled in unison.

The pirates reluctantly changed the channel, and everyone gathered around the television to watch the news. A reporter appeared on the screen, broadcasting live from somewhere in New York City.

“I’m standing on the corner of Thirty-Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, where police have stopped all vehicles and pedestrians from going any farther,” the reporter said. “The NYPD are preventing everyone from entering a two-block radius around the main branch of the New York Public Library. Police officials have yet to say the reason for such

precautions, but one thing is certain, *something dangerous is happening at the library*."

The news station played shaky footage from a helicopter flying over the library. It was difficult to see anything except the red and blue police lights surrounding the building on all sides.

"This isn't the first peculiar incident in the area this week," the reporter continued. "As I mentioned earlier, just a few days ago the wreckage of a bathroom mysteriously appeared in the middle of Bryant Park, just behind the library. The dumpers have yet to be identified."

"Did she just say they discovered a *bathroom*?" Conner asked.

"We rushed here as soon as we heard!" Charlotte said.

"We've just learned police have begun evacuating all the residences in the area as well," the reporter said. "As I said, very little information is being shared at this time, but according to eyewitness reports, the iconic lion statues at the library's entrance have been vandalized."

The helicopter footage showed a close-up of the library's sprawling front steps. Once the camera refocused, everyone could see that the lion statues were absent from their perches. Instead, they could be seen standing right in front of the library's entrance, as if the beasts were guarding the front doors. For a split second, it almost looked like the statues were *moving*.

"Did you just see that?" the reporter asked. "It appears the statues are being manipulated somehow. The one on the right looks like it's *growling* at the approaching police—*Oh my, the lion statue has just knocked the officer to the ground! The police are retreating! I've never seen anything like this! If I didn't know any better, I'd say we were witnessing magic!*"

Conner went pale and looked at his friends in disbelief.

"Oh my God…" he said. *"We've got to get to New York City!"*

Chapter Three

THE FROG IN THE MIRROR

Froggy hadn't seen sunlight in weeks. All he had to look at, day and night, was the macabre sight of Morina's basement. The missing children from the Corner Kingdom and Charming Kingdom still lay peacefully in their beds as the witch's horrible spell drained them of their life force. The children's youth and their vitality were magically transferred into potion bottles at the foot of their beds, which Morina usually sold to customers in her shop upstairs. Luckily, the witch hadn't returned in days to switch out the bottles, giving her captives more time before they were drained completely.

The longer Froggy was forced to witness the dark magic, the more it angered him. He desperately wanted to free the children from the witch's cruel spell, but he couldn't even free himself. No matter how hard he hit or kicked the plate of glass between them, it never budged. Unfortunately, neither he nor the children could be saved without magic powerful enough to counteract the witch's enchantments—and Froggy wasn't convinced such magic existed anymore.

If there had been any passing observers, Froggy would have appeared as a reflection without a source. Inside the mirror, he was completely alone in a pitch-black world, and the view of Morina's basement hovered in the air like a window without walls.

Regardless of how far he traveled in each direction, there was absolutely nothing but darkness for miles around. As he searched the strange world, he'd often wander so far from the basement that it would shrink to just a speck of light behind him. As much as it pained him to watch the cursed

children, Froggy was afraid to lose sight of it completely. Morina's basement was his only source of stimulation, and he worried he might go mad without it.

Life inside the mirror was affecting his mind enough already. The longer he was imprisoned, the faster time went. A simple daydream could cost him a few hours if he wasn't careful, and if he fell asleep, a day or two would pass by before he'd wake up. It also became increasingly difficult for him to remember where he was, how he had gotten there, and most concerning, *who he was*. Each passing moment felt less and less like reality and more like a bad dream.

"Get a grip on yourself!" he said. "Your name is Charles Carlton Charming. You were born twenty-five years ago in the Charming Kingdom. You were the fourth son of King Chester and Queen Clarice. Your brothers' names are Chance, Chase, and Chandler. Your mother passed away when you were a boy and your father died shortly after Chance married Cinderella. You have two nieces named Hope and Ash and have always wanted a big family of your own."

Froggy held his head and paced in a circle as he recalled the information. Whenever he felt his sanity start to slip, he found that reciting facts was the quickest way to restore it, but it became harder each day.

"When you were a teenager, you made the mistake of courting a witch named Morina. You discovered she practiced dark magic, so you called off the engagement. It enraged her so that she cursed you and made you look like a frog. It made you ashamed of your appearance, and you lived in seclusion for years. You built a home underground, where you read thousands of books and drank lily pad tea. Then one day, you found twelve-year-old twins in the forest and they changed your life forever!"

The memory of meeting Alex and Conner in the Dwarf Forests made him laugh. Had he known then about all the trouble they'd get him into, he probably would have run screaming in the opposite direction. But now, he was thankful for every second of life he had to claim.

"The twins are the ones who nicknamed you Froggy. Thanks to them, you're friends with Jack and Goldilocks, you're engaged to Red Riding Hood, and you were recently elected King of the Center Kingdom! You managed to create a wonderful life despite Morina's spell! She couldn't stand how happy you became, so she cursed you into this blasted mirror!

But you can't let her magic get the best of you—you can't let yourself fade away!"

This wasn't Froggy's first exposure to mirror entrapment, so he knew what to expect. A few years earlier, he'd witnessed the Evil Queen using the legendary Wishing Spell to free the man trapped in her magic mirror. Tragically, by the time the man was rescued, all his memories, his personality traits, and his physical features had melted away. Without a doubt, Froggy knew the same effects had begun creeping over him.

"You can't let the darkness consume you," Froggy told himself. "There is too much you'll miss out on if you give in to it! You have to find a way out of this prison so you can have a future with the people you love! You must hold on to your identity so you don't suffer the same fate as the man from the Evil Queen's magic mirror! You must fight off this horrible curse so Morina doesn't win!"

Froggy had no idea *how* to free himself from the mirror, but he knew he'd never find an answer by lingering around Morina's basement for eternity. So, putting one webbed foot in front of the other, Froggy journeyed into the great shadowy world surrounding him until Morina's basement disappeared from sight.

He wandered aimlessly through the darkness for what felt like hours, but he never found anything. It was so dark, he couldn't see his hands or feet, let alone something he might collide with. With every step, he worried he had made a grave mistake by leaving the basement and feared the oblivion would drive him insane.

"Please, let me find something that proves I'm not alone," he prayed aloud. "I just need something—*anything*—that can guide me to help!"

Suddenly, a speck of light appeared in the distance ahead. It was only the size of a pinhole but seemed as bright as the sun against the darkness. The discovery filled Froggy's stomach with butterflies—maybe he wasn't alone after all! He ran toward the light as fast as he could, and it grew into the shape of a tall rectangle—perhaps it was a door! As Froggy neared the anomaly, he realized it was another plate of glass, and his spirits sank. Had he walked through the darkness in a giant circle? Was the view of Morina's basement the only thing that existed in the dark world?

Froggy's heart skipped a beat when he noticed that the glass plate was much taller and wider than the plate he was used to. Perhaps he had found

something new! He peered into the glass and found, not the missing children as expected, but a massive great hall with pale brick walls, green curtains, and silver chandeliers.

"My word—*it's a palace!*" Froggy exclaimed happily. "Wait a moment, I recognize this place! I've been here many times before—it's the entrance hall of the Northern Palace! *This must be the view from another mirror!* The darkness must somehow connect the two mirrors."

Suddenly, hundreds of other square and rectangular plates of glass appeared all around him like floating windows. The bizarre phenomenon startled Froggy so much, he croaked—it'd been a while since he'd been excited by anything. He looked through the glass plates and saw into sitting rooms, drawing rooms, bedchambers, and hallways—all locations he recognized as well.

"I can see through all the mirrors in the Northern Palace!" Froggy said. "This must be how the man in the Evil Queen's magic mirror was such a capable spy! He was using the darkness as a path between mirrors!"

The discovery made Froggy's heart flutter. Perhaps the more he learned about the strange dark world, the closer he was to finding a way out of it. He desperately searched all the mirrors for someone to communicate with, but oddly, he couldn't find a single soul in the palace.

"That's peculiar," he said. "I've visited Chandler and Snow White a number of times and their home has never been this empty."

Finally, Froggy peered through a small circular mirror and found a cook in the palace's kitchen. She looked exhausted and was placing a bottle of wine and three glasses on a serving tray. The cook must have felt Froggy's eyes, because she stopped what she was doing and looked up before he could say anything.

"Hello!" he said happily.

"AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" the cook screamed.

She dropped the tray and glass shattered across the kitchen floor. Her reaction was so dramatic it scared Froggy, and he impulsively ducked out of sight. He wasn't really surprised by the cook's response, though—his appearance usually gave people a fright. He couldn't imagine how alarming it'd be to see an enormous frog in a mirror when they weren't expecting it.

"WHAT'S GOING ON IN THERE?" yelled a gruff voice.

Froggy peeked through the mirror again and saw a soldier storm into the

kitchen, but he was unlike any man Froggy had ever seen. The soldier was seven feet tall and had an unusually flat, square body. The number three was displayed on the upper right and lower left corners of his armor, and three symbols shaped like clovers were set in a line down the middle.

"Forgive me, sir!" the cook pleaded. "I was fetching wine for the emperors and thought I saw something in the mirror!"

The soldier glanced at the mirror, but Froggy ducked out of sight before he could be spotted again.

"Stupid woman," the soldier said. "Quit this foolishness and get back to work! Any more nonsense and you'll be thrown in the dungeon!"

"Yes, sir," the cook said with a bow. "It won't happen again, sir."

The cook quickly swept up the mess, placed three new glasses and a new bottle of wine on her tray, and hurried out of the kitchen.

"I don't understand," Froggy thought aloud. "Who are these *emperors*? What happened to Chandler and Snow White? And where are all the servants and guards who used to work here?"

Froggy followed the cook from mirror to mirror as she traveled through the palace. She entered the spacious dining hall, and Froggy appeared in the mirror above a large fireplace. He had been inside the Northern Palace's dining hall many times before, but he barely recognized it anymore.

All the portraits of the White Dynasty had been removed and replaced with paintings of a red-faced queen, an old hag wearing an eye patch, and a pirate with a hook. The three people pictured in the paintings sat around the table, enjoying a feast that could have fed hundreds. Froggy thought they were unattractive in their portraits, but they were even more hideous in the flesh. The barbaric way they scarfed down their food was equally unpleasant to witness.

"Your wine, my emperors," the cook said, and bowed to the table.

"IT'S ABOUT TIME!" the queen yelled, and hit the table with a clenched fist. "How dare you keep your emperors waiting! Do it again and you'll lose your head!"

"My deepest apologies," the cook said.

The cook trembled in the emperors' presence and could barely keep her hands still enough to pour wine into their glasses. When she was finished pouring, she bowed and rushed out of the room. The pirate and the queen raised their glasses before taking the first sip, but the hag didn't join them.

“None for me,” she growled. “I’m not much of a drinker.”

“To *us*,” the pirate toasted. “May the three great emperors continue their mighty reign as the conquerors of the new world!”

“Hear, hear,” the queen said. “And may our upcoming invasion go as smoothly as the last!”

The pirate and the queen clinked their glasses together and drank the wine in one gulp. The hag wasn’t in the mood to celebrate and angrily threw a half-eaten lamb shank across the room.

“How much longer will we have to wait?” she moaned. “It’s been weeks since we heard from the witch! How cruel of her to tease us with such a conquest, then force us to stay put! Our army is ready—why can’t we invade the new world *now*?”

“The *new world*?” Froggy whispered to himself. “What are they talking about?”

“I agree with Westie!” the queen said. “It’s impossible to enjoy the luxuries of this world when we know there are far greater pleasures in the other. What is taking the witch so long to contact us? I’m starting to doubt her competence!”

The pirate chuckled at their annoyance and twirled his moustache with his hook.

“Ladies, your eagerness is sabotaging your judgment,” he said. “Remember what the witch said: As soon as the portal opens, she will lead the other witches into the new world first. Once they’ve weakened the new world’s defenses, and the new world’s defenses have weakened them, she’ll send for us. *We’ll charge through the portal and claim the new world for ourselves!* It’s a guaranteed victory if we stick to the plan. Patience is a virtue—”

“PATIENCE IS FOR PEASANTS!” the queen yelled. *“Instant gratification is the only gratification for the powerful!”*

“Allow me to finish my sentence,” the pirate said. “Patience is a virtue *we’ll never need again*! The final days leading up to the invasion will be the last time we *wait* or *want* for anything. As soon as we conquer the new world, we’ll have a whole planet to ourselves and billions of slaves to serve us!”

“I will rule the land!” the queen declared.

“I will rule the skies!” the hag announced.

“I shall rule the seas!” the pirate professed. “And that silly witch is in for a rude awakening if she actually believes we plan on sharing any of it with her!”

The emperors roared with devilish laughter like a pack of evil hyenas. Once the amusement wore off, the queen yawned so wide, a watermelon could have fit inside her massive mouth.

“Universal domination is exhausting,” she said. “We’d better start conserving our energy before the invasion.”

“Oh what sweet dreams await us tonight!” the pirate said with a sinister grin.

The emperors stood up from the table and left the dining hall for bed. Once the room was empty, Froggy started pacing behind the mirror, and a thousand questions raced through his mind.

Suddenly, Froggy spotted something moving out of the corner of his eye. Until this moment, he’d thought the object in the middle of the dining table was a flickering candle. After taking a closer look, he realized it was a small and shimmering pixie stuck inside a tiny jar. The emperors had been using her as a centerpiece.

“Excuse me, young lady in the jar?” Froggy asked. “Can you hear me?”

The pixie looked around the dining room in a daze. Obviously, she could hear just fine, but she couldn’t see who was speaking to her.

“I’m over here! In the mirror above the fireplace!”

The pixie looked up and stared at Froggy like he was the most unusual thing she had ever seen.

“How did you get in there?” she asked.

“I could ask you the same question,” Froggy replied.

The pixie lowered her head sadly. “I’ve been trapped in here for weeks,” she said. “At first the captain was using me as a hostage, but now he’s using me as decoration—*it’s so degrading!* No matter how hard I try, I can’t escape! The jar is shut too tight!”

“Then you and I are kindred spirits,” Froggy said. “What’s your name?”

“Tinker Bell,” the pixie said.

The name sounded familiar, but Froggy couldn’t remember where he had heard it before.

“Forgive me, but I’m rather confused,” he said. “Who were those awful people eating dinner? And where did they come from?”

“Well, they’re all from different places,” Tinker Bell said. “The Queen of Hearts is from a place called Wonderland, the Wicked Witch of the West is from the Land of Oz, and Captain Hook and I are from Neverland.”

It suddenly clicked where Froggy had heard the names before. With every piece of knowledge he obtained, reality became much more difficult to comprehend.

“Wait a moment,” he said in shock. “I know those names—you’re characters from the books in my library! The late Fairy Godmother gave me those stories as a gift! How on earth did you get into *this* world?”

“I’m still trying to figure out where I am!” Tinker Bell said. “One night I was flying through London with my friend Peter, and the next thing I knew, some guy called the Masked Man was kidnapping me!”

“The *Masked Man*? But how did *he* get into your story?”

“He was using some kind of potion to travel into a bunch of stories,” the pixie said. “He was recruiting characters into something called *a literary army*. The Masked Man used me to enlist Captain Hook and the pirates from the *Jolly Roger*. Once he had the Wicked Witch, the Queen of Hearts, and their armies of card soldiers, Winkies, and flying monkeys, they invaded this world! All the kings and queens were dethroned and sentenced to be beheaded!”

Froggy gulped, fearing the worst for his family.

“And what happened to the royal families? Did they lose their heads?”

“No, luckily they all got away!” Tinker Bell said. “The queen, the captain, and the Wicked Witch blamed the Masked Man for their escape—they were so angry, they had him dropped from the sky!”

“Do you know where the royal families went?”

“Nobody does,” Tinker Bell said. “After the Masked Man was killed, a witch approached the emperors with an offer to conquer a new world—one much bigger than this one. They’ve been so excited about it, they stopped looking for the royal families. The witch and the new world are all they can talk about!”

“Did this witch or this world have a name?”

“I think they mentioned it once or twice,” the pixie said, and struggled to recall it. “I believe the witch’s name was Morgana—no, it was *Morina*! And the world she was planning to invade didn’t have a name, but she called it *the Otherworld*.”

Froggy went pale green and felt sick to his stomach. His escape from the mirrors would have to wait—clearly, there were much bigger problems at stake.

"Oh dear," he gasped. "The witches and the Literary Army are going to invade the twins' world! I have to find Alex and Conner—I have to warn them!"

Chapter Four

A SUBCONSCIOUS SURPRISE

Arthur was having the most interesting dream. He started it as a small ant crawling on the ground. Blades of grass towered over him like trees, and patches of dirt stretched into the horizon like enormous canyons. It was a very unique perspective, but Arthur figured he wouldn't get very far at an ant's pace. So the future king of England grew long legs and began hopping across the lawn as a grasshopper.

He landed on the roots of an evergreen tree and marveled at all the branches stretching into the air. Arthur wanted to climb to the branches, but he knew it was an ambitious journey to make as a grasshopper. So he grew four claws and a furry tail and scurried up the tree as a squirrel. Once he reached the very top of the tree, Arthur stared in awe at all the fluffy clouds in the sky. He desperately wanted to fly through the clouds above, so his tiny arms grew into a pair of magnificent wings, and he soared into the sky as an eagle.

Without a doubt, Arthur's dream had been inspired by Merlin's theatrical teaching methods. Recently, the wizard had been transforming the young squire into a variety of creatures to teach him lessons about greatness and gratitude.

"Oppression is a sport for the small-minded. *Empathy* is the path to true power," Merlin lectured. "A great leader respects all walks of life; otherwise, life will walk all over them."

"Ain't that the truth," Mother Goose agreed. "It's just like I told my friends during the Boston Tea Party: Tyranny is a revolution's welcome

mat."

Arthur was reminded of his elders' wise words as he flew above the land they were training him to rule one day. The flight made him very thirsty, and he descended toward a small lake. As soon as his claws touched the ground, they transformed into hooves, and Arthur galloped the rest of the way to the water as a horse.

When he arrived at the lake, Arthur found a young woman standing alone on the shore. She wore a white dress and had long strawberry-blonde hair, and stood with her back facing him. Arthur transformed back into his human self upon seeing the young woman. At first, he worried she might be one of the Mists of Avalon that Merlin was always warning him about, but there was something very familiar about her. Eventually, the young woman heard him approaching and turned around.

"Alex," Arthur said with a big smile. "It's so good to see you."

"Arthur?" she said. "Is that you?"

Alex was much more surprised to see him than he was to see her. In fact, Arthur wasn't rattled in the slightest; Alex made regular appearances in his dreams.

"Of course it's me," Arthur said. "Who else would it be?"

Alex looked around the lake, completely disoriented; she seemed to be afraid of her surroundings.

"Where am I?"

"You're in my dream," Arthur said. "I know it's a dream because it's the only place I get to see you. And now that I know I'm dreaming, I imagine I'll be waking up soon."

Whenever Arthur realized he was dreaming, he immediately returned to consciousness. He could feel his mind's clarity returning by the second, but oddly, this time he didn't wake up.

"I must be more tired than I thought," he said. "I'm grateful for every extra second I get to spend with you, even if it isn't the real you."

For the first time, Arthur noticed that Alex looked very different than she normally did when he dreamed about her. Her face was much paler, her eyes were red like she had been crying, and she blinked frantically like something deeply troubling was on her mind.

"This is so strange," she said. "I thought this was *my* dream, but maybe I've stumbled into yours."

“So I’m dreaming of *you* dreaming of *me*?” Arthur asked. “Well, I’m afraid to look up what this means in Merlin’s dream dictionary—”

“No, I mean *we’re both asleep*,” Alex said. “Just a minute ago, I was dreaming of my hometown, and then I suddenly found myself at this lake. I think we’re communicating in our sleep.”

“So it’s really you?” he asked softly.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s really me.”

Arthur didn’t know which possibility was more overwhelming: that he and Alex were connecting subconsciously, or that he was standing in front of the real Alex and not a figment of his imagination.

“But how is this possible?”

“I don’t know,” Alex said, and struggled to think of an explanation. “When my brother and I were little kids, we used to see each other in our dreams all the time. We would wake up the next day and recite everything we had done and everything we’d said. No one believed us, so we stopped mentioning it—we figured it was just a twin thing other people didn’t understand. I was hoping it still worked and tried contacting him now. But it looks like my dreams led me to yours.”

The two shared a small but very telling smile.

“If this is real, it’s no mystery why it’s happening,” Arthur said. “We probably spend so much time thinking about each other, our subconscious minds are trying to tell us something.”

“Arthur, please don’t start this again; it was hard enough the first time,” Alex said. “We both agreed that living separate lives was the responsible thing to do. You have a destiny to fulfill, and you can’t jeopardize it by running off with the first girl you met in the woods.”

“I’m not jeopardizing anything,” he said with a playful grin. “I plan on fulfilling everything on my destiny to-do list. I’m going to pull the sword from the stone, I’m going to start Camelot, I’m going to form the Knights of the Round Table, and I’m even going to find the Holy Grail. Once I’m done, I’m going to find *you*, and you won’t have any more excuses to keep us apart.”

“Arthur, I may not be around by the time you do it all,” she said quietly.

“Of course you’ll be around,” Arthur said with a laugh. “I’ve been training twice as hard with Merlin and Mother Goose so I can finish much faster than the legend predicts. It may have taken another King Arthur a few

decades to complete his legacy, but I know it'll only take me a couple of years because I've got you to inspire me."

Arthur's devotion brought tears to Alex's eyes, but not in a good way.

"No," she said, and shook her head. "Even if you finish it earlier than expected, you have to stay in Camelot. You'll throw your life away if you do it all for me."

"You can't throw a life away if it's already fulfilled!"

"You're not listening! I'm trying to tell you it'll be a complete waste! If you rush through your legacy you might get hurt!"

"On the contrary, I'll be even more careful knowing you're at the finish line—"

"Arthur, I'm trying to tell you I won't be alive much longer!"

Once this heavy confession was made, Alex covered her face and began to sob. Her words made Arthur freeze where he stood. He prayed she was being sarcastic or overreacting, but if the tears streaming down her face were any indication, Alex was telling the truth.

"Alex, please tell me that's a joke," he said.

"I wish it were!" she cried. "I would love to live happily ever after with you, Arthur, but it's not meant to be."

"But why? Are you sick?"

"I've been cursed by a very powerful witch. She has me under a spell that controls my every waking moment. So far, she's made me do a lot of terrible things to innocent people. I don't know what she has planned next, but I know something horrible is coming—thousands of people are going to get hurt! The witch puts me to sleep when she isn't using me. That's why I was trying to contact my brother in my dreams. He's got to find a way to stop me—*no matter what it takes!*"

"Alex, don't be ridiculous," Arthur said. "There's got to be another way to free you from the witch's curse besides killing you."

"I'm afraid there isn't," she said. "This curse is unlike any dark magic I've seen or heard of. It fills me with so much anger, it blinds me—I'm barely aware of the damage I'm causing! I get trapped inside my head with feelings of self-doubt, self-hatred, and regret. All I can think about are my mistakes, my flaws, and how undeserving I am of love and happiness! The more my misery grows, the more powerful I become—and the more powerful I become, the stronger the curse gets. The voices in my head have

to be stopped, and there's only one way to put a creature out of its misery!"

Arthur couldn't believe he was hearing such things. Their shared dream had quickly escalated into a nightmare.

"I refuse to believe that," he said. "There must be something Merlin and Mother Goose can do to help you—there must be something *I* can do to save you!"

A thick layer of mist suddenly rose off the lake and blew toward them. The mist formed the shape of a large hand, wrapped its fingers around Alex's body, and started pulling her toward the lake.

"What's happening?" Arthur shouted.

"The witch must be waking me up!" Alex said.

Arthur grabbed Alex's arm, but he was no match for the giant misty hand.

"Alex, you need to listen to me!" he said. "We're going to save you from this! We're going to find you and free you from this curse, I promise! You just have to stay strong—don't give up yet!"

Alex stared up at Arthur with eyes full of tears and fears, but very little hope.

"Good-bye, Arthur."

Alex was pulled from Arthur's grip and dragged underwater, and she disappeared from sight.

"AAALLLEEEXXX!"

Arthur rapidly awoke from the nightmare. He was sweating profusely, and his eyes darted all around his room as he remembered where he was. His heart was beating so hard, he could hear it over the sound of Merlin and Mother Goose snoring in the next room. Arthur had never been so affected by a dream in his life, so he knew it hadn't been a normal dream. *Alex was in trouble and she needed help.*

The squire leaped out of bed and stormed into Merlin and Mother Goose's room. His elders awoke in a terrible fright and sat straight up like they had been electrocuted.

"Arthur? What is it, my boy?" Merlin asked, and reached for his glasses.

"Where's the fire?" Mother Goose said, and reached for her flask.

"Forgive the intrusion, but something terrible has happened!" Arthur announced.

"Have the Saxons invaded?" Merlin asked.

“Are parachute pants back in style?” Mother Goose asked.

“No, it’s *Alex*,” Arthur said. “She’s been cursed by a terrible witch! We need to go to the Otherworld immediately and rescue her!”

“How do you know all this?” the wizard asked.

“Alex and I were communicating with each other in our sleep! She was trying to contact her brother but found me instead. She told me she’s been cursed and is being forced to do terrible things! Then a hand made of mist rose out of a lake and dragged her under the surface!”

Arthur explained himself so quickly, he had to catch his breath afterward. Merlin and Mother Goose looked at each other with sleepy, uneasy eyes—but they weren’t concerned about Alex.

“Artie, have you been drinking my bubbly?” Mother Goose asked.

“You have to listen to me!” he pleaded. “Alex is in trouble, and she thinks the only way to stop the curse is if someone kills her! We’ve got to do something before she gets hurt!”

“It sounds like you just had a terrible nightmare,” Merlin said.

“It wasn’t just a nightmare. It was the real Alex!” Arthur said. “I swear I’m not overreacting!”

His elders still weren’t convinced.

“It’s not uncommon for dreams to feel very realistic when they’re about the people we love,” the wizard said. “Why don’t you fetch my dream dictionary, and we can get to the bottom of what Alex actually represented in the dream.”

Arthur grunted loudly and paced in a circle. No matter what he said, Merlin and Mother Goose only saw him as a love-struck teenager. Arthur desperately needed their trust, but they would never take him seriously unless he proved himself trustworthy. A transformation was needed to gain their respect, and luckily, Arthur knew just the thing to do it.

The squire raced out of Merlin’s cottage and ran into the woods. It was raining and still dark outside, but Arthur persisted. He wasn’t wearing any shoes and was barely clothed, but he was numb to everything except his fiery determination. Finally, he arrived at his destination and entered the clearing where the great sword lay in the stone.

Arthur was destined to remove the sword once his training was complete and he was ready to be crowned King of England—but given the circumstances, he hoped his desire to save Alex would somehow expedite

his destiny. Arthur might not have been in any danger, but if Alex was in trouble, then his whole world was at stake.

So the young squire wrapped his hands around the sword's handle and pulled on it with all his might. His fingernails bled and blisters covered his palms, but Arthur kept pulling, as if his life depended on it….

Chapter Five

TURBULENCE AHEAD

As soon as Conner had an inkling of his sister's whereabouts, he rushed to the nearest computer and bought the five remaining tickets on the next flight to New York City. He used Bob's credit card without asking, but Bob couldn't care less. All that mattered to anyone was finding Alex and bringing her home. Liberating the fairy-tale world would have to wait until they figured out what was happening in Manhattan.

At five o'clock the next morning, without any sleep whatsoever, Conner, Bree, Jack, Goldilocks, Red, and Charlotte piled into Charlotte's SUV and headed to Willow Crest International Airport. Conner had no idea what to expect once they got to New York, but he knew it'd be easier to handle it with his friends at his side. They left the hospital in such a hurry no one had a chance to pack, but knowing what his friends usually carried on their persons, Conner managed to grab a duffel bag before they left the hospital so Jack's and Goldilocks's more *questionable* belongings could be stowed.

When they arrived, Conner ran into the airport to check their bag while his friends waited outside. They stood on the curb by Charlotte's car and took in their first sights of the Otherworld beyond the halls of Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital.

"So this is what they call an *air port*," Jack said as he cradled Hero. "What exactly is a *port of air*?"

"It's where you board planes that take you to other locations," Bree explained.

"Like a stable?" Goldilocks asked.

“Yes, but with *much* bigger horses.”

Jack and Goldilocks nodded and looked around in awe, but Red wasn’t as impressed.

“It’s rather *colorless* in the Otherworld, isn’t it?” she remarked. “If you ask me, the whole *gray and glass* thing is a bit overdone.”

As soon as he finished inside, Conner emerged through the airport’s automatic doors and joined his friends at the curb.

“The bag’s been checked under my name,” he said. “Apparently it’s completely legal to travel with a sword and an axe as long as they’re checked. That’s America for you.”

“What is *checked*?” Jack asked.

“It means they’ll stow our luggage under the plane before we leave, and then when we arrive, it’ll come out on a conveyor at the baggage claim.”

Conner’s friends from the fairy-tale world stared at him like he was speaking in tongues.

“We have absolutely no idea what any of that means, but we’ll take your word for it,” Goldilocks said.

“Does everyone have their tickets and IDs?” Conner asked the group.

Bree, Jack, Goldilocks, and Red held up the tickets they had printed at the hospital and the identification cards they’d been assigned. Unfortunately, traveling with friends from another dimension meant that airport security would be a challenge. If they’d had more time Conner could have come up with better IDs that resembled his friends more, but given their time crunch, they had to work with what they had.

“Will someone notice these aren’t our *actual* identities?” Jack asked.

“I’m praying the TSA officer won’t notice,” Conner said. “We’ll get into serious trouble if we’re caught, so if anyone asks, Jack is Dr. Robert Gordon, Goldilocks is Charlotte Gordon, and Red is Bree’s cousin, Amanda Campbell.”

“Bree, would you happen to have a more *attractive* relative I could impersonate?” Red asked.

“Sorry, that’s all I’ve got,” Bree said. “Amanda’s ID has gotten me into dozens of concerts I was too young for. I hope it brings you the same luck.”

Conner nervously eyed the airport. “We’re going to need more than luck to pull this off,” he said.

“Conner, this is too risky,” Charlotte said from inside the car. “Why

don’t Bob and I just come with you?”

“I need you guys to keep an eye on the characters from my short stories,” he said. “Besides, the five of us have a long history of magical dilemmas. We’ll know what to do if things get out of hand. We’ll call you if we need backup.”

Charlotte closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. She knew Conner and his friends were more than capable of handling themselves, but it didn’t make it any easier knowing that her son might be walking into danger.

“Please be safe,” she said. “If you find your sister, let us know as soon as possible.”

“We will,” Conner said. “I promise.”

Conner hugged his mother through the car window and led his friends into the airport. At first glance, Jack, Goldilocks, and Red were completely overwhelmed. Travelers brushed and bumped into them from all directions. Everywhere they looked was another flashing screen that displayed departure times and announced delays. The commotion was too much for Hero, and he began to fuss.

“Here, give him to me,” Goldilocks said, and took the newborn from Jack. “There, there, no need to cry. Who’s Mama’s good boy? *Who’s Mama’s good boy?*”

It tickled everyone to watch Goldilocks interact with her son. Ever since Hero had been born, Goldilocks had been a different person altogether. The infamous fugitive and swashbuckling swordswoman was now the queen of baby talk and changing diapers at record-breaking speed. However, motherhood hadn’t softened Goldilocks one bit. On the contrary, being a mother had made her tougher than ever—especially when someone came between her and her child.

“Goldie, are you sure taking Hero to New York is a good idea?” Red asked. “Babies need lots of attention, you know.”

“We’re still taking *you*, aren’t we?” Goldilocks snapped.

Red raised her hands defensively. “I’m just suggesting you leave him with Charlotte while we’re gone. Caring for an infant *and* searching for a friend is quite a handful.”

“Absolutely not,” Goldilocks said. “I refuse to be one of those women who puts her entire life on hold because she’s a mother. I’m more than capable of fulfilling my responsibilities to my child without abandoning my

friends."

"Sorry I asked," Red said. "Personally, I would have hired a nanny before purchasing a cradle."

Conner guided his friends through the crowded airport to the long security line. He stood on his toes to see over all the heads and took a good look at the TSA officer working the front. The officer was an older man who scowled at all the travelers as if a piece of sour candy were stuck in his mouth. He thoroughly checked every person's ID and ticket before allowing them to pass.

"Oh crap, he's good at his job!" Conner bemoaned. "Bree and I will be fine with our student IDs, but I don't know how to sneak you guys past him. It would be so much easier if Alex were here. She could just zap him with a magic spell and be done with it."

"Looks like we'll have to zap him with a bit of *your* magic instead," Jack said.

Conner sighed. "Jack, I appreciate the sentiment, but this is not the time for another pep talk."

"I'm being serious! We don't have your sister's talents, so you have to use your own. Imagine this was one of your stories and your characters were in this exact predicament. What would you have them do or say to get past the officer?"

Conner scratched his chin and walked in a circle as he thought about it. He appreciated the encouragement, but the consequences of failure were more severe than his friends could imagine. It took creativity just to survive the Otherworld—he would need a stroke of genius to manipulate it.

"I've got an idea," he said. "If the officer notices your IDs are fake, you'll need to *distract* him. Say something completely unexpected that'll make him forget what he's thinking about."

"Oh, I know!" Red said. "I'll say I'm a queen in another dimension!"

"That'll only make things worse," Conner said. "I've got a line for each of you—but you have to say it exactly as I tell you."

He whispered the diversions into his friends' ears and hoped they would do the trick.

"We shouldn't stand together in line," Bree said. "If he notices the IDs are fake, it'll look less suspicious if we're spaced out."

"Great idea," Conner said. "All right, here goes nothing!"

Conner and Bree entered the line first. Once five passengers had lined up behind them, Jack followed. Goldilocks waited for six passengers to line up behind her husband, then joined the line with Hero. Red was a little confused about how a line worked. She let over a dozen people cut in front of her before realizing she was supposed to wait behind them and follow them to the officer.

Finally, after forty very anxious minutes, Conner and Bree reached the front and presented their tickets and identification to the TSA officer. He read their boarding passes and looked them up and down with the same scowl he had worn all morning.

"Are you two together?" the officer asked.

"What?" Conner asked in shock. "No, we're just friends—well, at least I think. We haven't had a chance to figure it out."

"Sir, I'm asking if you're *traveling* together," the officer said, and scowled even harder. "The airline is not concerned with your relationship status."

Conner blushed so hard, he was afraid his cheeks would melt off his face. Obviously, his anxiety was getting the best of him. If Bree hadn't been equally anxious she would have burst out laughing.

"Yes, we're traveling together," she said.

The TSA officer looked them up and down one last time and initialed their tickets.

"Go ahead," he said. "Next!"

Conner and Bree walked past the officer and joined a smaller line for the metal detector. They took their time putting their shoes and belts into bins so they could keep an eye on their friends. After a few moments, Jack was next in line and handed his ticket and identification to the TSA officer.

"Good morning," Jack said cheerfully. "I'm going to New York."

The TSA officer read Jack's documents before looking at him. As the officer's gaze moved upward, Jack repeated Conner's suggested line before the officer could notice that the ID wasn't legitimate.

"Hair plugs," Jack announced.

"Excuse me?" the officer asked.

"Hair plugs," Jack repeated. "I'm sure you're wondering how I got my hair back. I see you're follicle-challenged yourself, so I'm happy to pass along my doctor's information if you're interested in getting plugs.

Technically he's not a *real* doctor—and he works out of a kitchen in Chinatown—but as you can see, his work is wonderful!"

The TSA officer was so offended, his mouth fell open. He shook his head as he initialed Jack's ticket and handed the documents back to Jack without giving the ID a second glance.

"I'm not interested in *hair plugs*," the officer growled. "Get out of here."

"Suit yourself," Jack said.

Conner and Bree were relieved when Jack joined them in the line for the metal detector, but their mission was far from over. Before they knew it, Goldilocks and Hero were stepping up to the TSA officer's stand. The officer looked back and forth between Goldilocks and Charlotte's ID and meticulously studied both faces.

"Ma'am, have you recently lost weight?" he asked.

"Obviously," Goldilocks said, and nodded to Hero.

The TSA officer wasn't convinced. He knew something was different, he just couldn't put his finger on it.

"Did you also change your facial structure?" he pressed further.

Goldilocks glared at him with a scowl that rivaled his own.

"You'd be *amazed* how much a body can change after giving birth. Shall I give you the details?"

The TSA officer looked like he was going to be sick. He quickly initialed the ticket before she had the chance to elaborate.

"Have a nice flight," he said without looking Goldilocks in the eye.

With Conner, Bree, Jack, and Goldilocks successfully past the officer, the only one left was Red. They tried to stay close in case they needed to intervene, but they were herded toward the metal detector by other TSA officers. Soon they were out of earshot and prayed Red could handle it herself.

Red sauntered up to the TSA officer and presented her ticket and Amanda Campbell's ID with a large smile. The officer scanned her documents, initialed her ticket, and handed them back without a problem. Conner was shocked it had gone so smoothly, but then the officer said something that absolutely infuriated Red. She stomped her foot and pointed dramatically at him.

"HOW DARE YOU, SIR!" she yelled loudly enough for the whole airport to hear. *"THAT IS THE BIGGEST INSULT I'VE EVER RECEIVED*

IN MY LIFE!"

The officer's scowl shifted to a look of terror. Red stormed past him and joined her friends at the metal detector.

"What the heck just happened?" Conner asked. "What did he say to you?"

Red held up the ID of Amanda Campbell. "He said *this* was a good picture of me!" she grumbled.

The metal detector was a very foreign concept to Conner's friends, so it required a great deal of supervision and reassurance. Conner had to promise Jack he would get his boots back after they were scanned, Bree had to stop Goldilocks from putting Hero into one of the bins, and Red had to be scanned by hand because she refused to part with her jewelry—but once they were through the detector and had gathered their things, they had *officially* snuck through airport security.

"I can't believe we just pulled that off," Conner said. "I don't think I've breathed since we joined the security line."

"I wasn't worried for a second," Jack said. "But then again, I have a lot more faith in you."

They turned a corner, and Jack, Goldilocks, and Red froze. The sight of all the stores, coffee shops, bars, and restaurants throughout the terminal was almost too much to bear.

"Oh my, it's like a little kingdom!" Red said.

"What's that heavenly aroma?" Goldilocks asked.

"That's called *coffee*," Bree said. "It's a really big deal in the Otherworld."

"What's that place with all the moving pictures of men on grassy fields?" Jack asked.

"That's called a sports bar," Conner informed. "It's where people go to watch other people play games."

"What about that shiny room with all the small bottles and portraits of beautiful but bored women?" Red asked.

"That's a perfume store," Bree said.

Red was amazed such a place existed. "They let *commoners* wear perfume in this world? Oh, this I've got to see!"

The young queen dashed for the perfume store before Bree could grab her. Since they had some time to kill before their flight boarded, Conner

thought it was perfectly fine to let his friends explore the Otherworld amenities in the airport. He took Goldilocks to the coffee shop and ordered her a vanilla latte. While Goldilocks enjoyed her latte, Conner took Jack to the sports bar. He did his best to describe the rules of the football and baseball games being broadcast, but Jack was convinced he was making it up as he went along. Bree had the exhausting task of supervising Red as she bounced from shop to shop. It was like watching a hyper toddler in a toy store.

At six-thirty, fifteen minutes before boarding, the gang regrouped at Gate 26 and took seats. Red proudly showed off all the purchases inside her enormous shopping bags.

"I must say, what this world lacks in color, it makes up for in merchandise! I found this exquisite leather bag made from an animal called a faux. I got this delicious bottle of perfume called Febreze. I bought this handy hand mirror with little electric torches around the frame. And lastly, I couldn't walk away from this colorful pamphlet called *Glamorous Magazine*. Look, it has an article inside titled 'How to Steal Your Man Back from His Ex.' I hope it mentions something about magic mirrors."

"How did you pay for all this?" Conner asked.

"Pay?" Red said, as if it were a word from another language.

"She didn't—*I* did," Bree said. "She would have gotten arrested for shoplifting if I hadn't had my emergency credit card on me. It's maxed out, so the next emergency is on someone else."

"Don't worry, I got gifts for all of you," Red announced. "Conner, I got you this shirt that says 'I Do My Own Stunts'—classy, right? Jack, I got you this 'World's Greatest Grandfather' hat—sorry, they were out of 'father.' I got this adorable stuffed frog in a suit for Hero so he'll always know what his uncle Charlie looks like. And Goldilocks, I got you this convenient little contraption called a BabyBjörn—why carry your child when you can wear him?"

"Thanks, Red! That's so kind of you! Your thoughtfulness always surprises me!"

For whatever reason, Goldilocks was speaking much faster than she usually did, and her left eye started to twitch.

"Good heavens, Goldie. What happened to you?" Red asked.

"It's called caffeine!" Goldilocks said. *"I had a latte! A vanilla latte, to*

be exact! It's a brilliant beverage! I was so tired a few moments ago, but now I feel invincible! I could fight a whole army with my bare hands! Actually, I'm going to get some more!"

Jack gently placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Sweetheart, maybe take it easy on the caffeine. People are starting to stare."

"Attention, all passengers on Flight 219 to John F. Kennedy International Airport, it is now time to board the aircraft," said a voice over the intercom. "Please line up with your boarding passes readily available."

Conner, his friends, and all the other passengers formed a line at the gate. They had their tickets scanned, then proceeded down the long Jetway and boarded the plane. Their flight was filled with businesspeople, families on vacation, and a troop of Boy Scouts.

"Follow me and I'll show you to our seats," Conner instructed. "We're in the back because we booked our tickets so late. Bree and I are in seats 38A and 38B, Jack and Goldilocks are behind us in seats 39A and 39B, and Red is in 40A—wait, *where's Red?*"

Conner searched the cabin, but Red was nowhere to be found. The corner of her new purse caught his eye, and he saw that she'd seated herself in the first-class cabin. He tried waving to get her attention, but Red was already enjoying a moist towel and reading her copy of *Glamorous Magazine*.

"Ma'am, is this your seat?" a flight attendant asked her.

"No, but it'll do just fine," Red said, and went back to her magazine.

The flight attendant pulled the boarding pass out of Red's hand and read her seat number.

"I'm sorry, this cabin is reserved for first class only. You need to sit in your assigned seat."

"Assigned?" Red asked like she had never heard the word before. "Which seat is that?"

The flight attendant pointed to the back of the plane where Red's friends were.

"I'm supposed to sit *back there*?" Red said in disbelief. "I thought those were for elves! No human being can feasibly fit in such a small space!"

"Welcome to commercial travel," the flight attendant said. "Now, either move to your seat or I'll have you escorted off the plane."

Red gave the flight attendant an impressively dirty look. As the young

queen walked through the economy cabin, she held her nose like she was walking through a field of manure. She squeezed into seat 40A behind Jack and Goldilocks. Luckily, no one was sitting in 40B beside her, because her dress took up both seats.

As the last passengers boarded the aircraft, the constant slamming of the overhead bins started to hurt Hero's ears. The infant began to cry, and everyone in the cabin glared in Jack and Goldilocks's direction.

"Everyone is looking at us like we've personally offended them," Jack remarked.

"It's because you brought a baby on a plane," Bree said. "They're worried he's going to cry the whole way to New York."

Goldilocks was *not* going to put up with this. She passed Hero to Jack and stood in the aisle where all the passengers could see her.

"Now, wait just one Hickory Dickory second," she called out. *"I don't care if you have to listen to my baby cry! Eight days ago I experienced the worst pain humanly possible by pushing him out of my body! It's something all mothers must endure for the survival of our species! It's natural, it's brave, it's beautiful, and I will NOT be disrespected for it! Now, I suggest you all wipe those foul looks off your faces or YOU'LL be the ones crying all the way to New York!"*

"I'd listen to my wife if I were you," Jack added. "She's on *caffeine*."

All the passengers quickly diverted their gazes elsewhere. Bree tried to start a round of applause for Goldilocks, but no one joined her.

Once his friends had stopped causing problems and settled into their seats, Conner was able to take his first deep breath of the day. He looked around the plane and saw a Boy Scout sitting across the aisle. He was cute and chubby and obviously took the Boy Scouts very seriously, because his whole uniform was covered in pins and badges. The boy eagerly stared down at a map of New York City and was so giddy, he could barely sit still.

"Hi!" the Scout said when he noticed Conner. "My name's Oliver. What's yours?"

"I'm Conner. Are you excited about New York?"

"I've never been so excited in my whole life!" Oliver exclaimed. "This is actually my first time on a plane! New experiences don't make me nervous, though. *This* badge is for bravery."

"Are you doing anything special in New York?" Conner asked.

“I’m going for the big Boy and Girl Scouts of America Camp-Out!” Oliver said happily. “This year they’re having it tonight in Central Park! Normally the city doesn’t allow campers in the park, but they’re making an exception for us. My family doesn’t have much money, so I had to sell a thousand pounds of popcorn to pay for the trip. I sold more than any other Scout in the Western Region! That’s what *this* badge is for.”

“Congratulations,” Conner said. “That’s a lot of popcorn.”

“How about you? What are you going to New York for?”

“Um… visiting family. At least, I hope. It’s kind of a surprise trip.”

“Neat,” Oliver said. “Well, it’s been nice talking to you, but I’d better get back to my map. I’m trying to memorize it before we land. I’m really good at navigation, that’s what *this* badge is for.”

“Good luck,” Conner said. “Have fun camping.”

The Boy Scout smiled so hard, dimples appeared in his cheeks. He looked back down and became lost in his map of New York City again. Oliver’s excitement reminded Conner of Alex on their first trip to the fairy-tale world. He remembered how she’d hogged their map of the kingdoms and how they’d fought over directions. The memory made Conner smile for the first time all week, but it was odd to think of a time when the Land of Stories didn’t feel like home.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please lend us your eyes and ears as we go over our safety demonstration,” said a voice from the speakers.

The flight attendants stood in the aisles and gave instructions on how to buckle the seat belts and wear the safety vests, and pointed to the emergency exits. A cartoon showed the passengers how to properly put on the oxygen masks and evacuate the plane in the event of an emergency. By the time the safety demonstration was done, the plane had departed the gate and was cruising toward the runway.

Red reached over Jack’s and Goldilocks’s seats and tapped Bree and Conner on the shoulders.

“Sorry, those yellow vests were so ugly, I zoned out,” she said. “Could you repeat those bits about *cabin pressure* and *water landings*?”

“If the cabin loses oxygen, masks will drop down from the ceiling so we can breathe.” Bree filled her in. “And in the event of a water landing, the bottom of the plane will turn into a flotation device.”

“But that’s absurd,” Red said. “Why would we end up in water? Can’t

the driver just steer around it?"

Suddenly, the plane rocketed down the runway. The force slammed Red into her seat and she screamed.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?" she shouted.

"Relax, we're just taking off," Bree said.

"TAKING OFF *WHAT*?"

"Into the air."

Bree thought it was obvious, but judging from the horrified look on Red's face, it wasn't.

"THIS THING GOES INTO THE AIR?" she asked in a panic.

"Yeah, that's why it's called a *flight*."

"I WISH SOMEONE HAD SHARED THAT MINOR DETAIL BEFORE WE BOARDED! IS IT TOO LATE TO GET OFF?"

"Yes!" the whole cabin said in unison.

As the jet launched into the air, Conner closed his eyes. The subtle movements of the plane quickly rocked him to sleep. Unfortunately, it wasn't a peaceful rest.

Conner saw flashes of his sister in his dreams…. He couldn't understand her completely, but she was desperately trying to communicate with him…. She was trying to warn him that something terrible was going to happen…. He needed to stop it before all was lost…. He asked her to repeat herself, but it became harder and harder to hear her…. As if a dying strobe light were illuminating them, Conner could see less and less of her…. A dark, smoky cloud suddenly wrapped around Alex…. It pulled her away from him like a giant hand…. She was screaming, but there was nothing he could do to help….

"Alex!" Conner cried, and awoke with a jolt.

"Are you okay?" Bree asked him.

"Sorry, bad dream. How long was I out?"

"For about an hour. You've been twitching since takeoff but I didn't have the heart to wake you up. I can't imagine how exhausted you are."

"I suppose shaky sleep is better than no sleep at all," he said. "You've been up as long as I have. Did you manage to nap at all?"

"I tried but *no bueno*," she said. "There's just too much on my mind."

Conner nodded. "I hear you," he said. "Gosh, I would give anything to think about something besides my sister. I'm even starting to worry about

her in my dreams. I just had a nightmare where she tried to warn me about something, but I couldn't understand her. I'm sure it's just the stress talking."

He turned to Bree, hoping to find some reassurance in her eyes, but she had none to spare.

"Conner, there's something I need to tell you," she said. "I was trying to be considerate and didn't want to overwhelm you, but I can't keep it to myself anymore."

Although he had no idea what she was talking about, Conner's whole body went tense. Bree was always so calm and cool about everything; she wouldn't be so worked up if it weren't serious.

"You can tell me," he said. "I doubt there's much that'll trouble me more than I already am troubled."

"All right," Bree said, and took a deep breath. "I wasn't completely honest about my trip to Connecticut. I was visiting family, that part is true, but I lied about the *reason* I went."

Conner gulped. "Was it another guy?"

This was the last question Bree expected to come out of his mouth.

"No, it's nothing like that," she said, and went straight to her point. "When Emmerich and I came back from the fairy-tale world, after the Grande Armée was defeated, I kept thinking about the portal in Neuschwanstein Castle. The more I thought about its history, the less sense it made."

"It was a pretty complicated story," Conner said, remembering. "In the early 1800s, the Grande Armée forced the Brothers Grimm to lead them to the fairy-tale world. The brothers took them to Neuschwanstein Castle and activated the portal with the magic panpipe, and the Grande Armée went inside it. What the Armée didn't know was that Mother Goose had bewitched the portal so anyone without magic blood would be trapped inside it for two hundred years."

"Exactly," Bree said. "So what I couldn't stop asking myself was how Emmerich and I got through the portal without being trapped."

Conner's life had been so complicated since the Grande Armée invaded the fairy-tale world, he'd never had a chance to think about the portal at Neuschwanstein Castle—but Bree was absolutely right! She and Emmerich *should* have been trapped for two centuries just like the Grande Armée.

There was only one reason why they weren't.

"You have *magic* in your blood!" Conner exclaimed. "Emmerich's my cousin, so that's where his magic came from, but what about *yours*?"

His heart skipped a beat as he thought of one possibility.

"Oh no—we aren't related, too, are we?" he asked.

"Um… no," Bree said. "You're forgetting the grossest part about the story. In order for the Brothers Grimm to activate the portal at Neuschwanstein Castle, they *also* needed magic in their blood. Mother Goose transferred some of her blood into theirs so they could use the panpipe to trap the Armée. And that magic was passed down from generation to generation of the Grimm family."

"Holy DNA test," Conner said. *"You're a descendant of the Brothers Grimm!"*

Bree nodded. "As you can imagine, I was really eager to prove it. That's why I ran away to my cousin Cornelia's house in Connecticut. I needed to confirm my family's heritage."

"So that's why Cornelia was so calm about everything she saw at the hospital! Your family has known about magic and the fairy-tale world for longer than my sister and I have!"

"They know about a lot more than that," Bree confessed. "Cornelia, Frenda, and Wanda are part of a secret group called the Sisters Grimm. My fifth-great-grandmother, Maria Grimm, founded the group in 1852. Knowing that the fairy-tale world existed, the women in my family began investigating some magical incidents happening around the world."

"Magical incidents?" Conner asked. "Like what?"

"There have been hundreds of things they've covered up over the years! Mermaid skeletons washing ashore in North America, pixies being photographed in Europe, trolls found wandering the deserts of Australia—you name it! The Sisters Grimm realized creatures from the fairy-tale world were crossing into the Otherworld, but they didn't understand *how*. Your grandmother and the fairies were in charge of all the portals, so how were the creatures getting through without their help?"

"Magic?"

"No—*science!*" Bree said. "The Sisters Grimm discovered that the fairy-tale world is just an alternative dimension of the Otherworld. They're like race cars on the same track. However, the Otherworld used to move at a

much faster speed than the fairy-tale world. So every so often, the worlds would briefly overlap—or rather, *collide*. Each time the worlds collided, unbeknownst to the fairies, a portal between worlds would briefly appear. Over the centuries, thousands of magical creatures have accidentally stumbled through a portal and wound up in the Otherworld. But about sixteen years ago, the worlds stopped colliding and the portals stopped appearing altogether."

"Why? What happened?"

Bree laughed. "Do you really have to ask?"

"Wait—it's because me and my sister were born!" Conner exclaimed. "We are children of both worlds, and our birth magically set the Otherworld and the fairy-tale world on similar speeds."

"Right!" Bree said. "And race cars moving at similar speeds take a lot longer to overlap."

"So, how long until the worlds collide again?"

"The Sisters Grimm predict it's very soon. They're also worried that when it happens again, the overlap may be permanent. It won't be a portal that appears, but a *bridge* that connects the worlds forever."

"Do they know *where* the bridge will appear?" Conner asked.

"They've scientifically mapped everything out," Bree said. "Judging by all the locations of past portals, they're expecting the bridge to appear in the middle of New York City."

"New York City!" Conner said. "What are the chances?"

"I don't think it's a coincidence, Conner," Bree said. "This is a huge interdimensional phenomenon! The Sisters Grimm can't be the only ones who know about it. And if they were able to discover it using *science*, I imagine someone else has discovered it using *magic*. If your sister was kidnapped by a witch, there's a reason she took her to New York City, and I'd bet serious money it has something to do with the worlds colliding."

Conner was pushed back into his seat again, only this time it wasn't from the force of the aircraft, but from fear. Apparently he was wrong—something *could* trouble him more than he already was troubled.

"Attention, ladies and gentlemen," a flight attendant said over the speakers. "The captain has turned on the seat belt sign, as he expects turbulence ahead. We ask that you stay in your seats, because things are about to get very bumpy."

Conner sighed. “She can say that again.”

CHAPTER SIX

PRISONERS OF THE MIRROR

Froggy frantically searched every mirror in the Northern Palace for someone who could help him contact Alex and Conner. He figured the twins were most likely in hiding with the royal families, so if he found a person who knew *where* they were hiding, he could send them a message and warn them about the Literary Army's plans to invade the Otherworld.

The more he searched, the more doubtful his mission became. Each room in the palace was either empty or occupied by the Queen of Hearts' card soldiers, the Wicked Witch's flying monkeys, or one of Captain Hook's pirates. Occasionally Froggy would spot a servant in the palace, but they were never far from the despicable emperors or their loathsome henchmen. When the servants weren't forced to serve, they were locked away in the dungeon, where there were no mirrors for Froggy to communicate through.

Even if Froggy *could* find someone willing to help, it was very unlikely they'd know how to reach the twins. Still, he continued his exhausting pursuit regardless of its improbability. Soon he learned that help wasn't as impossible as he'd thought—*he was just searching the wrong side of the mirrors*.

"Hello."

A soft voice made Froggy jump. His eyes darted back and forth between the palace mirrors as he searched for the source, but he couldn't find where the voice was coming from.

"I'm not in the palace, silly," it laughed. "I'm right behind you."

Froggy looked over his shoulder and jumped when he discovered he wasn't alone in the mirror dimension. Walking toward him out of the darkness was a young girl. She had long raven hair and pale white skin and didn't look a day over eight years old. Froggy had become so used to isolation, it took him a moment to realize the girl wasn't a hallucination.

"Oh my word," he said in disbelief. "You're a… a…*person*!"

The little girl giggled. "Of course I'm a person. What else would I be?"

"Forgive me for being overwhelmed," Froggy apologized. "I'm just so relieved to see someone else. I didn't realize there were *others* trapped in mirrors."

"Oh, there are hundreds of people trapped in mirrors," she said. "I find dozens of them each day."

Froggy searched the darkness around him but didn't find a single soul besides the young girl.

"But where are they?" he asked. "I've been in this world for weeks and I haven't seen anyone but you."

The little girl smiled at Froggy like he was an amusing cartoon.

"You don't have to be trapped *inside* a mirror to be trapped *in* the mirror," she said. "Think about all the people who stare at their reflections and dislike what they see. Think about all the people who base their happiness solely on what they look like. Think about all the people who don't enjoy life because they don't enjoy their appearance. If you ask me, the mirror imprisons us all."

Froggy went silent for a few moments. He hadn't expected such insight to come from someone so young.

"When you put it that way, I suppose this is the second time I've been trapped in a mirror," he said.

"When was the first?" she asked.

"A long time ago, when I was cursed to look like a frog," he explained. "I was so ashamed of how I looked, I spent years hiding from the rest of the world. I let my fear of what others might think of me dictate my whole life. Fortunately, I overcame my fears before it was too late."

"What changed your mind?"

"I found the greatest love and friendship of my life while I felt the ugliest," he said with a smile. "If that doesn't prove how little appearance matters, I don't know what else would."

The little girl sighed and shook her head.

“That’s lucky,” she said. “It takes most people their whole lives to learn that lesson. Every day I watch more and more people stare at themselves with such deep sadness in their eyes. I try to give them compliments and tell them it’s the inside that counts, but they’re always so frightened to see a little girl appear, they don’t listen to a word I say.”

The girl was one of the most peculiar children Froggy had ever met. She spoke so elegantly and moved around the mirrors so freely, it made him question whether she was really a little girl at all.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

The girl thought about it, but nothing seemed to come to mind.

“I don’t remember,” she said. “I’m sure I had one once, I just can’t recall what it was.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Froggy said. “Memory loss is a side effect of living in this dimension. The longer we stay inside it, the more we fade into nothing but reflections. How long have you been trapped?”

The girl thought even harder but still couldn’t find the answer.

“I don’t remember that, either,” she said with a laugh.

“Doesn’t that concern you?”

“It did once, but I forgot why,” she said. “Actually, I find forgetfulness very pleasant. A memory is nice for people with good memories, but amnesia can be quite comforting to others.”

“You must have lived a rather tragic life to believe that,” Froggy said.

“I suppose I did,” she said, pondering. “I miss having dreams, but at least I don’t live with nightmares anymore. Perhaps you’ll enjoy forgetting, too.”

The little girl’s bizarre outlook made Froggy even more anxious. He didn’t know how much longer he would have his own memory, but she was proof it was only a matter of time before his mind was wiped clean.

“I wish forgetfulness were all I was concerned about,” he said. “I’m in desperate need to find someone who can give my friends a warning. Their home is about to be invaded by a terrible army, and I need to contact them before it’s too late. Have you ever communicated with someone in the palace without scaring them off?”

The little girl thought about it, and to the amazement of both of them, she had an answer.

“I’ve been able to communicate with lots of people in the past without frightening them,” she recalled. “However, I don’t believe I’ve ever talked to someone in *this* palace.”

“You mean, you’ve traveled to *other* palaces?” Froggy asked.

“Well, of course! I’ve traveled all over the kingdoms. Haven’t you?”

“No,” he said. “Besides a witch’s basement, the mirrors in the Northern Palace are all I’ve been able to find in this world.”

“You can travel to any mirror you’d like,” the little girl explained. “All you have to do is visualize *where* you want to go, and the mirror dimension will take you there. It’s as simple as that.”

Suddenly, all of Froggy’s time in the mirror dimension began to make sense. Had he realized what he wanted to find before he’d started searching, the Northern Palace would have appeared much sooner than it had. Knowing that all the mirrors throughout the kingdoms were available to him gave him his first rush of hope in weeks. If the Bailey twins were near a mirror, he could deliver a warning himself—he just needed to figure out *where* they were hiding.

Froggy closed his eyes, and the first location that came to his mind was the castle in the Center Kingdom. He visualized the castle’s hallways, the sitting rooms, the dining rooms, and the spacious library Red had built for him.

“You did it!” the little girl cheered. “Look over there! You made more mirrors appear!”

Froggy opened his eyes and looked where she was pointing. In the distance amid the darkness was a cluster of twinkling lights, as if a small patch of a starry night sky had manifested. The little girl grabbed Froggy’s hand and pulled him toward the lights.

“We’ll search these mirrors first, and if we don’t find your friends there, we’ll search every mirror in the kingdoms until we do!” she said.

“You don’t mind helping me look for them?” Froggy asked.

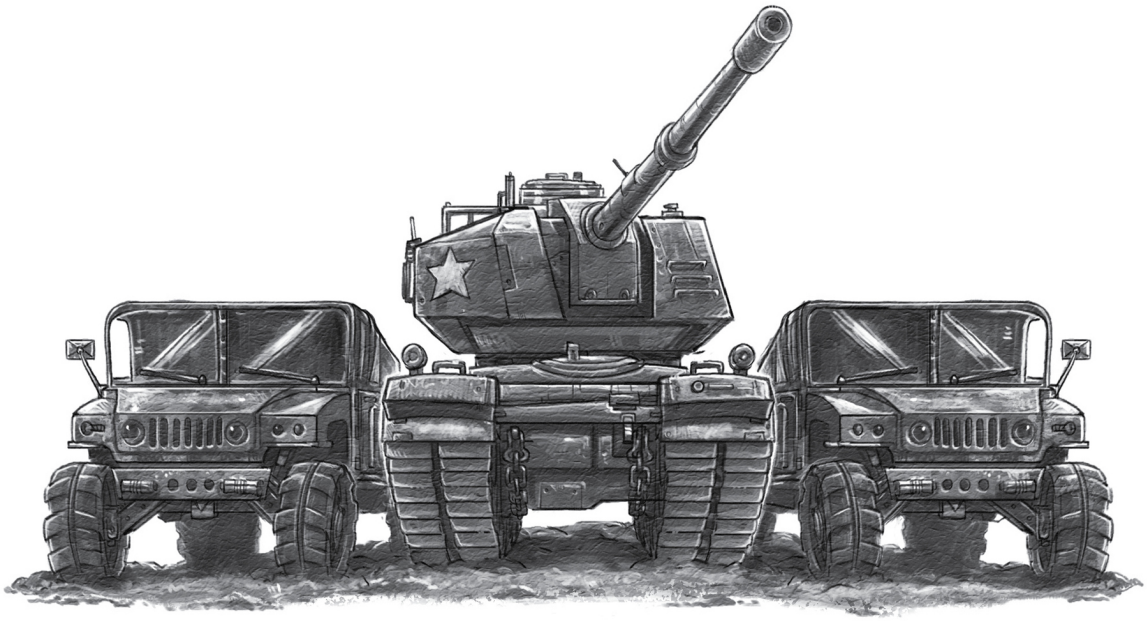
“Not at all,” the little girl said. “It’s been ages since I had an actual activity. By the way, I forgot to ask—what’s *your* name?”

Froggy opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. He thought he was just experiencing a mental hiccup of sorts, but his silence continued. No matter how hard he thought about it, Froggy couldn’t recall his name.

“I… I… I can’t remember,” he admitted. “But that doesn’t matter now—

all that matters is finding my friends and warning them."

The little girl shrugged and started to skip as she pulled him toward the newly materialized mirrors. Froggy was glad she was escorting him; otherwise he would have frozen with panic after forgetting his own name. Wherever the Bailey twins were, he prayed they'd find them quickly. Froggy had to warn them about the Literary Army while he still knew there was something to warn them about.



CHAPTER SEVEN

PIZZA BAGELS AND BARRICADES

In Midtown Manhattan, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street, was a famous bistro called Cheesy Street. The café was a tourist hotspot and sold all the food New York City was famous for. Visitors and locals alike journeyed to Cheesy Street for their renowned pizza, bagels, cheesecake, pastrami, and clam chowder. The staff had seen their fair share of eccentric customers over the years, but nothing like the party of twelve who joined them for lunch today.

Mindy, Cindy, Lindy, and Wendy (known in their community as the Book Huggers) shared a plate of Cheesy Street's signature pizza bagels. The girls stared down at the cheesy hybrid on their plates in total silence, with blank expressions. Sitting across from them were all four pairs of the Book Huggers' parents. They eyed their daughters with great caution and concern, as if the girls were explosives with faulty wiring.

"I'm so glad we decided to go on this trip," Mindy's mom said. "It was very last-minute, but sometimes a spontaneous trip is exactly what you need to *clear your head*. Isn't it?"

The Book Huggers didn't respond or look up from their plates.

"I think we picked the perfect place to visit," Cindy's dad said. "Isn't New York an amazing city? There are so many things to do and see here. What's been your favorite attraction so far?"

Once again, the Book Huggers didn't say a word or move a muscle.

"I loved Central Park," Lindy's mom said. "I also liked the Empire State Building, visiting Ellis Island, our tour of the United Nations, and of course,

last night's performance of *The Phantom of the Opera*."

"I imagine everyone leaves New York feeling influenced or inspired in some way," Wendy's dad said. "It really makes you think how many *different* people there are in this world. It reminds you how many *different* interests there are to devote your time and energy to. It sure makes Willow Crest and everyone who lives there seem rather dull. *Wouldn't you agree?*"

The Book Huggers nodded in perfect unison without looking up. It was rather creepy, but their parents were thankful for any response they could get.

"Let's address the elephant in the room, and I'm not talking about Cheesy Street's mascot," Mindy's other mom said. "We know the last week has been really challenging for you. Recovering from a psychotic breakdown requires profound strength. *Hallucination* and *obsession* are very difficult things to recognize and admit to, but we couldn't be prouder of you girls for taking the proper steps to treat yourselves. Dr. Jackson was very confident that all you needed was a little time, a little love, and some pleasant distractions, and you'd be good as new. Hopefully this spontaneous trip will be just what the doctor ordered."

Finally, the Book Huggers looked up from their plates and smiled at their parents. The trip itself wasn't enough to take the Bailey twins off their minds, but the compassion coming from their parents warmed their hearts.

"Thank you," Mindy said. "And even though we've been quiet all week, we really appreciate you taking us on this trip."

"Yeah, this week has been awesome," Cindy said. "It was really nice of you guys to all take time off from work to treat us like this."

"Whatever we may be going through, we're lucky to have parents like you to go through it with," Lindy added.

Wendy pointed to her heart and then pointed to their parents—implying that their compassion was fully reciprocated. The Book Huggers' parents were so relieved to finally hear their children speak, tears came to their eyes.

"Fantastic," Cindy's mom said. "I'm so glad we're all on the same page. Now, let's make the most of our last day in the city. I say we take a helicopter tour after lunch, but first, let's order some dessert!"

The party of twelve happily looked over the dessert menu. Their concentration was momentarily interrupted by a procession of four police

cars speeding down the street with their sirens blaring.

"Wow, whatever is happening at the library must be serious," Lindy's dad said. "We've seen dozens of police cars headed that way, and I heard they evacuated all the buildings in a two-block radius."

"When we were shopping on Fifth Avenue earlier, we asked an officer what was going on," Wendy's mom said. "They told us it was a big gas leak but nothing they couldn't handle. The evacuation is just a precaution."

The Book Huggers looked out the window behind their parents to watch the police cars racing down Fifth Avenue, but their hearts stopped at another alarming sight on Thirty-Fourth Street. Through the front window of a taxi van waiting for the cops to pass, they saw a very familiar freckled face.

"Conner!" the Book Huggers collectively gasped.

Their parents quickly snapped their heads back toward their daughters and stared at them as if they were explosives whose fuses had now been lit.

"What did you say, girls?" Mindy's mom asked.

"Cobbler," Cindy's dad suggested. "I think they said they want the *cobbler*. Isn't that right?"

"No, Dad!" Cindy said. "Look behind you! It isn't a hallucination this time! Conner Bailey is in a taxi outside Cheesy Street!"

The Book Huggers' parents quickly turned to the window, but thanks to some unknown force in the universe that constantly made them the punch line of a big cosmic joke, Conner bent down a second before they would have seen him. The only person the Book Huggers' parents saw inside the taxi was its Middle Eastern driver. The taxi had continued down the street before Conner resurfaced.

"NOOOO!" Mindy screamed. "He was right there—*right there!*"

"I saw him, too, I swear it!" Lindy protested. "Conner Bailey was just outside the window!"

"But why would he be here?" Cindy asked. "Of all the restaurants in New York City, why would he be outside ours?"

"There's only one explanation!" Mindy announced. "We've been right the whole time! Something otherworldly is going on with the Bailey twins! It started in school, it spread to the hospital, and now it's in *New York City*!"

Wendy made two fists and slammed them on the table, as if to say *"THERE IS A VAST CONSPIRACY AGAINST US AND WE MUST GET TO*

THE BOTTOM OF IT!"

The Book Huggers burst into tears. Their parents exchanged exasperated looks and sighed—apparently New York City wasn't the pleasant distraction they'd hoped it would be. Even though everyone in Cheesy Street was already looking at their table, Lindy's mom raised a hand to get the waiter's attention.

"Check, please!" she said.

After a turbulent flight and a rough landing at John F. Kennedy International Airport, Conner and his friends hopped into a taxi van for another bumpy ride into Manhattan. As if the driver were being paid per pothole, the taxi rattled and shook as it traveled down the highway toward Midtown.

Goldilocks had a difficult time holding on to Hero, so she put him in the BabyBjörn Red had purchased. The newborn wasn't bothered by the rocky ride at all. After nine months in Goldilocks's womb, Hero was used to such commotion and found it quite comforting. The rougher things became, the easier it was for him to sleep.

Conner sat in the front passenger seat and changed the driver's radio to the local news to hear if there had been any developments since the night before. According to the news, a massive gas leak was responsible for all the barricades and evacuations in the area surrounding the New York Public Library. However, to Conner's surprise, nothing was mentioned about the lively lion statues they had seen on television.

"I don't understand," he said. "There was footage of the statues swiping at police officers! We can't be the only ones who saw it."

"They're probably covering it up to prevent hysteria," Bree said. "It's just like the 1947 UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico. Newspapers reported that wreckage of a flying saucer had been discovered, and then the following day, the army ordered the press to retract the story and say it was just a weather balloon."

Conner gulped at the thought of Alex being turned into another weather

balloon. He was so worried about his sister, he barely noticed the Queens neighborhoods zipping past his window or the Manhattan skyline in the distance ahead. The taxi entered the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, which stretched underneath the East River, and reemerged in the middle of Manhattan. Conner and his friends stared at the city in awe as their taxi zigzagged between the crowded sidewalks and towering skyscrapers. The hustling metropolis was such a spectacular sight, it almost took Conner's mind off Alex.

"The whole city feels like it's buzzing," Goldilocks noted. "They must sell a lot of caffeine here."

"The buildings stand higher than beanstalks!" Jack said. "Conner, why didn't you tell us New York City was so…*tall*?"

"Actually, I'm just as amazed as you are," Conner said. "I've written about cities like this, but I've never been able to describe the feeling it gives you at first sight. Now I know it's because it *can't* be described in words."

Red grunted—forever unimpressed with the Otherworld.

"Sure, it's *big*—but why does everything need to be so boxy?" she asked. "Is it too much to ask for a tower, or a dome, or a sensible spiral? I feel like a mouse in a shoe-box closet."

They drove through a wide intersection, and the glistening roof of the Chrysler Building came into view. Red squealed and pressed her hands and forehead against her window.

"Now *that's* more like it!" she said.

The taxi paused briefly on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street, waiting for a procession of police vehicles to pass by. Conner could have sworn he recognized a few people in the window of a restaurant called Cheesy Street, but he figured it was just his mind playing tricks on him. As he moved to take a second look, he dropped his wallet on the floorboard. By the time he sat back up, the taxi was already moving again.

Once the police were gone, the driver turned south on Fifth Avenue and pulled over between Thirty-Third and Thirty-Fourth Street.

"I know you wanted to get as close to the library as possible, but you may want to get out here," he suggested. "Traffic is backed up in this area because of the gas leak. It'll be faster if you just walk the rest of the way."

"That works," Conner said. "How much do I owe you?"

"That'll be sixty bucks total," the driver said.

“We have to *pay* for this ride?” Red asked in disbelief. “For goodness’ sake, a runaway carriage would have been more comfortable. We were two bumps away from having our innards scrambled!”

“Don’t complain to me, lady,” the driver said. “I took the smooth streets.”

Conner retrieved some cash from his wallet and paid the driver. He and his friends got out of the taxi and joined the bustling pedestrians on the Fifth Avenue sidewalk. Conner looked up and down the street, but the crowds made it difficult for him to figure out where they were.

“Which way is the public library?” he asked, thinking aloud.

“I’d look it up on my phone, but I don’t want my parents to track me—*it’s a long story*,” Bree said. “Looks like we’ll have to resort to ancient methods and *ask* for directions.”

Conner and Bree tried to flag someone down, but all the tourists and locals breezed right past them. There were so many people, Red couldn’t see where she was walking and almost stepped on a homeless man sitting on the ground.

“Hey, Your Majesty!” he said. “Watch where you’re going.”

The man was scruffy and wore a janitor’s uniform under a dirty brown coat. Red smiled down at him and patted his head like he was a dog.

“Oh, bless you,” she said. “Thank you for recognizing me, but there’s no need for formal titles while I’m in this world.”

“Red, he’s being sarcastic,” Bree said. “Most people in the Otherworld don’t walk around in ball gowns and tiaras.”

Since the homeless man was the only person on the street who wasn’t in a hurry to get somewhere else, Conner figured he was their best shot at getting directions to the library.

“Excuse me, sir?” he said. “Could you tell us how to get to the New York Public Library from here?”

“Sure I *could*,” the homeless man said. “Got a dollar?”

Conner shrugged and gave him a dollar. The homeless man held it toward the sun to make sure it was a legitimate bill.

“Walk north on this street for six blocks and make a left—you can’t miss it,” he said. “Although I doubt they’re letting anyone get close after what happened last night.”

“Are you talking about the gas leak?” Bree asked.

“A gas leak? Is *that* what they said happened?” The homeless man snorted and shook his head disapprovingly. “*Typical*. They’re always trying to control people by keeping them in the dark. Well, they can’t control me! I was at the library last night and I saw what really happened with my own eyes.”

Conner and his friends formed a half circle around the homeless man, which seemed to make him a little nervous.

“Mind telling us what you saw?” Conner asked. “We’d love to know what’s really going on.”

“I’d love to tell you, but a story will cost you ten bucks,” the man said.

“Ten bucks?” Conner said. “But you only charged me a dollar for directions.”

“Listen, kid, I didn’t wind up on the streets from being a bad businessman. If I got something you want, it’s gonna cost you.”

Conner rolled his eyes and gave the homeless man ten dollars. Once the man had inspected the money, he tucked it away and began his story.

“It was around midnight and I was sleeping down by the library,” he said. “They’ve got this bench near a fountain—it’s my favorite place to take a snooze in the city. Anyhoo, I was dreaming about playing in the World Series when I was rudely awoken by the sound of police sirens. I was worried the library security guard had called the fuzz on me, so I hid behind some bushes. The next thing I know, some broad comes floating out of the library like a ghost! She raised her hands into the sky and *BAM! Lightning struck both the lion statues!* Naturally, once I saw that, I bolted like a rat in a cathouse. To be honest, it’s not even the first time I’ve seen magic in this city—but hey, who’s gonna believe a bum like me?”

Conner’s heart was beating so hard, he could feel it in multiple parts of his body. He leaned down and looked the homeless man directly in the eye.

“The girl who floated out of the library—what did she look like?” he asked.

“She was really pale,” the man said. “She had bright blue eyes and long reddish-blondish hair, and wore a white dress. Come to think of it, she looked a lot like *you*, kid.”

“Alex,” Conner gasped. “We were right—she’s here! She’s at the library!”

Without any warning, he dashed up Fifth Avenue as fast as he could, and

his friends followed. They weaved through the crowds on the sidewalk until they came to a dead stop at a barricade on Thirty-Eighth Street.

The blockade was an overwhelming sight. A dozen police cars were parked in a row across the street to prevent pedestrians and traffic from going any farther. Beyond the cars, dozens and dozens of police officers were scattered throughout the vacated area. Conner tried sneaking past the barricade, but an officer blocked him.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," the officer said. "Where's the fire?"

"Please, you have to let me through," Conner said. "It's an emergency."

"Sorry, no one is allowed past this point," the officer said. "They're clearing up a nasty gas leak up by the library. It isn't safe."

"Yes, I know that's what they're telling people, but my sister is the one at the library! I need to get to her before someone harms her!"

"Young man, the library has been evacuated," the officer said. "I promise, wherever your sister was, she's been moved to a safe location."

"No, you don't understand!" Conner yelled. "She's the one causing all this! You need to let me through so I can help her!"

As if Conner were on autopilot, he pushed the officer out of his way, squeezed between the rows of police vehicles, and made a run for the library before he even realized what he was doing. Unfortunately, he was only half a block past the barricade when he was tackled to the pavement by another police officer. Conner fought the officer off with all his might, determined to reach the library. It took two more officers to keep him pinned to the ground. They handcuffed him and threw him into the backseat of the nearest vehicle.

"You've got to let me go!" Conner pleaded. *"The whole world may be in danger if you don't let me find my sister!"*

"You're out of your mind, kid!" an officer said, and slammed the car door. "Stay in there and chill out!"

It all happened so fast, none of Conner's friends knew what to do. They were vastly outnumbered by the police officers standing nearby. If they tried to intervene now, they'd *all* get arrested. Conner looked through the window at his friends standing helplessly on the sidewalk and mouthed *"Sorry."* Now that he'd been detained in the backseat of a police car, the odds of finding Alex had plummeted. One impulsive move to save his sister might have cost them everything.

Suddenly, the ground began to vibrate. Everyone in the area worried it was an earthquake until the vibration was accompanied by the sound of roaring engines. Conner, his friends, and all the police officers looked down Thirty-Eighth Street and discovered a long row of beige Hummers speeding toward them. The police allowed the Hummers through the barricade, and they parked side by side in an impressive straight line. Swarms of United States Marines emerged from the vehicles in camouflage uniforms with their weapons ready.

An older man with gray hair and broad shoulders stepped out of the first Hummer and all the Marines lined up behind him. Unlike the soldiers, the older man wore a green dress uniform decorated with medals. He also wore dark sunglasses and was smoking a cigar. He scanned the area like he had just stepped into a war zone and then directed his stern gaze at the police officers.

"Which one of you is Commissioner Healy?" he asked.

An older African-American man in a navy blue suit stepped out from the group of police officers.

"General Wilson, I presume," the commissioner said. "Thank you for coming, sir."

The commissioner and the general shook hands just a few feet from the police vehicle that Conner sat inside. Thanks to a slightly rolled-down window, he could hear every word the men were saying. He ducked down in the backseat so they wouldn't see him eavesdropping.

"Commissioner, will you please tell me what the *heck* is going on in your city?" the general said. "What could possibly warrant the president's decision to put boots on the ground?"

"I wish we had more answers for you, General, but we're still trying to figure it out," Commissioner Healy said. "Long story short, the library is under attack. Two of my officers responded to a distress call early this morning and discovered a young girl with strange abilities. She caused lightning to appear and somehow made the lion statues on the library steps come to life. The lions are currently guarding the library and attack anyone who tries to enter it. Once we were able to obtain photographic proof, we contacted the White House."

Interestingly, the general didn't question the commissioner's report, as Conner had expected.

"And where is the girl *now*?" the general asked.

"As far as we know, she's still inside the library," the commissioner said. "What she's doing is anyone's guess."

General Wilson took a long drag on his cigar and slowly exhaled as he absorbed this information. After a moment, he turned on his heel and addressed the Marines behind him.

"All right, soldiers—it's time to get to work," the general ordered. "I want the barricade around the library extended eight blocks in each direction. Contact the Pentagon and have them establish a no-fly zone above the city of Manhattan—I don't want anything leaking to the press. I want snipers stationed on every roof surrounding the library. Once we take our position at the base of the steps, we'll open fire on the statues and try to take them out; then we'll find the girl inside."

The commissioner was appalled by what he heard. "General, you can't shoot the lion statues! They're national landmarks!"

General Wilson removed his sunglasses and looked the commissioner in the eye.

"Thank you for your input, Commissioner, but your little backyard circus is now a matter of national security," he said. "I'll decide what measures I should or should not take to ensure that your city stays in one piece. If you have a problem with that, I'll have you placed on the other side of that barricade faster than you can say '*I Love New York*.'"

The commissioner didn't argue any further. The general nodded to his Marines and they spread out like cockroaches to fulfill his orders. The general returned to his Hummer and was driven up Fifth Avenue to get a closer look at the library. As the commissioner and his police officers watched the Hummers drive off, Jack snuck past the blockade and quietly opened the back door of the police car Conner was sitting in.

"Come on!" Jack whispered. *"Quick—while they're all looking away!"*

Once Conner had regrouped with his friends, they raced down Fifth Avenue and ducked into the first alley they could find. With one slice of his axe, Jack freed Conner from the handcuffs binding him. Conner walked around the alley in a huff and angrily kicked the side of a dumpster.

"This is getting more difficult by the second!" he moaned.

"At least we know *where* your sister is," Goldilocks reminded him. "That alone puts us in a better place than we were."

“We still have to get to her, though,” Conner said. “These army guys won’t care if Alex is being controlled by a witch or not—they’ll *kill her* the moment they think she’s a threat. We’ve got to get to her before they do, and I don’t have the slightest idea of how to do that. And I’m sorry, Jack, but no amount of imagination or positive thinking is going to help us get past the NYPD, the United States Marines, *and* two possessed lion statues!”

Bree, Jack, Goldilocks, and Red didn’t even try to persuade him otherwise. They paced around in silence as they tried to brainstorm a possible plan. Their train of thought was interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat—someone who wasn’t in their group. They looked up and saw that the homeless man from earlier was standing a few feet away.

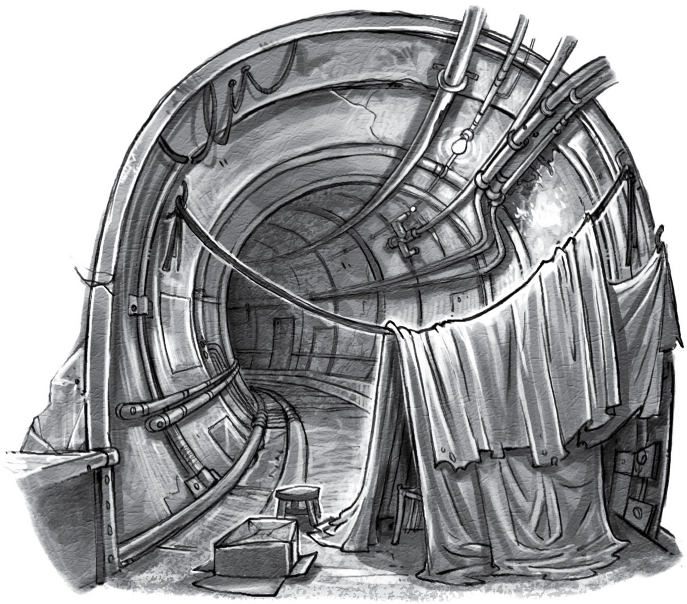
“Forgive the intrusion,” he said. “I saw your little scuffle with the fuzz back there. I know they didn’t want to listen to you, but I’d like to help if you’ll let me.”

“Sorry, dude, I’m out of cash,” Conner said.

“This time I’m offering my services free of charge,” the homeless man said. “I know I may not look like much, but I know how to get to your sister.”

“No offense, but I sincerely doubt that,” Conner said. “We need to get inside the public library, and every entrance is being guarded by the US Marines and two man-eating statues!”

A sly smile spread across the homeless man’s face. “You’re wrong,” he said. “They aren’t guarding *every* entrance.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CALVIN COOLIDGE EXPRESS

Per General Wilson's orders, the US Marines began evacuating every building within a ten-block radius of the New York Public Library. Watching the soldiers move from building to building and forcing people out of their homes and businesses made Conner feel like he was watching a scene from an apocalyptic movie. Judging from the looks on the New Yorkers' faces, everyone knew the situation wasn't a gas leak—something *far worse* was happening in Midtown Manhattan.

The homeless man led Conner and his friends covertly from alley to alley, careful not to attract the attention of the Marines. With every step Conner wondered if they were doing the right thing by following him, or if they were putting their trust in a complete lunatic.

"Where are you taking us?" Conner asked.

"Shhhh!" the homeless man said, and placed a finger over his mouth. "If they catch us sneaking around, we'll never get to your sister."

"Sorry—*where are you taking us?*" Conner whispered.

"We're going to a subway entrance on the corner of Fortieth and Broadway."

"We're taking the *subway*?" Conner asked. "But a train won't get us inside the library!"

"We don't need a train where we're going," the homeless man said.

The homeless man dashed across the street to hide behind a pile of trash, and the others followed him. They moved from building to building very slowly and only crossed streets when they were certain no Marines were

watching. By the time they reached the intersection of Fortieth and Broadway, Midtown Manhattan was practically a ghost town and it was getting dark out. After a quick huddle behind a large delivery truck, the homeless man raced across the intersection to the southwest corner and hurried down the steep steps into the subway station. A moment later, he popped his head up and whistled to the others.

"The station's empty!" he called to them. "Hurry—while the coast is clear!"

Conner and his friends joined him underground. Their footsteps echoed off the station's title walls. The homeless man jumped over the turnstile to avoid paying, and the others copied him. Red was the least agile, and her gown got caught in the revolving turnstile. Goldilocks had to slice off a layer of her dress to set her free.

"Now everyone follow me to the end of the platform," the homeless man said.

"Wait!" Conner said. "We aren't going any farther until you tell us *exactly* where we're headed."

"Kid, I promise it'll make sense once we're there, but until then, you'll just have to trust me."

The homeless man reached the end of the long platform and jumped down onto the train tracks.

"He can't be serious," Bree said. "We're not actually going to follow him *down there*, are we?"

"What choice do we have?" Conner asked.

"Don't stop now—we're almost there!" the homeless man said.

Conner, Bree, and Jack jumped off the platform and then offered their hands to help Goldilocks and Hero, but Red took their hands first. The homeless man removed a flashlight from inside his coat and sprinted down the train tunnel.

"You might want to hurry—trains usually run through here every ten minutes," he warned.

Fearing a speeding train would hit them at any moment, Conner and his friends ran after the homeless man as fast as they could. The farther they went, the darker the tunnel became. Soon the shaky light from the homeless man's flashlight was all that was keeping them from tripping over the train tracks. Suddenly, the homeless man made a quick left turn and disappeared

from sight. When the others caught up with him, they entered a different tunnel they would have never spotted on their own. Unlike the previous one, the new tunnel had no visible cables or train tracks on the ground.

"Welcome to the Calvin Coolidge Express!" the homeless man announced. "Or at least what's finished of it."

"The *what*?" Conner asked.

The homeless man chuckled. "Don't worry, very few people know it exists," he said. "In 1928, construction began on a new transit system to take New Yorkers from Staten Island all the way to Central Park. The following year the Great Depression hit and construction came to a halt. Later, the need for steel was so high during World War Two that plans were scrapped altogether. By the time the war ended, the Calvin Coolidge Express was completely forgotten."

"Whatever it is, it smells awful," Red said. She took the can of Febreze out of her purse and sprayed the air around them.

"Unfortunately, the tunnels were built right beside the sewers, but you get used to the smell after a while."

"Why would you bring us to an abandoned subway tunnel?" Conner asked.

"*Because* one of the many stops planned for the Calvin Coolidge Express was Bryant Park," the man explained. "The city didn't want to obstruct the park, so they decided to place the stop in the basement of the New York Public Library."

Conner's face lit up so much, he practically glowed in the dark tunnel. He heard the man loud and clear, but it sounded too good to be true.

"So you're saying we can get to the library from this tunnel?" he asked.

"Like I said before, they aren't guarding *every* entrance," the homeless man reiterated. "See why I didn't tell you where we were going? You wouldn't have believed a bum like me unless you saw it with your own eyes."

Conner was embarrassed to admit it to himself, but the homeless man was right. If he had been just a tiny bit more critical of their guide, they would have been rounded up and sent away like all the other New Yorkers in Midtown Manhattan.

"I just realized we haven't been properly introduced," he said. "I'm Conner Bailey, and these are my friends Bree, Red, Jack, Goldie, and their

son, Hero. What's your name?"

"The name's Rusty—Rusty Bagasarian," the homeless man said with a quick bow.

"Thank you so much for leading us here, Rusty," Conner said. "How did you even know this tunnel existed?"

"You learn a lot about a city when you live on its streets," Rusty said.

"Have you always been poor?" Red asked.

"Red, don't be rude!" Goldilocks reprimanded her.

"It's all right—I get that all the time," Rusty said. "Homelessness is a recent chapter for me. I used to live in Brooklyn and worked as a janitor at the Belvedere Castle in Central Park. A couple of months ago I was fired and lost everything."

"Why were you fired?" Jack asked.

"Well, to put it bluntly, I saw something *magical* and it changed my life forever."

"Was it *Hamilton*?" Red asked. "I keep seeing signs about him posted all over the city. If he's anything like Shakeyfruit's *Hamhead* I hope we get a chance to meet him."

The others rolled their eyes and ignored her.

"Earlier, when you told us about the library, you mentioned it wasn't the first time you'd seen magic in the city," Bree said. "I didn't think you were being serious, but now I'm really interested to hear about it."

Rusty let out a deep sigh before telling them. Clearly, it was a difficult subject for him to talk about.

"It happened a few months ago when I used to work night shifts at Belvedere Castle," he said. "I was in the middle of cleaning the joint when this strange vibration suddenly came out of nowhere. I figured it was just an earthquake and went back to work, but when I got home, none of the morning news stations were reporting an earthquake. I was convinced I had just imagined it, but then a few weeks later, the vibration happened again. The second time was much stronger and lasted longer than the first. I called the police to report an active fault line, but they assured me it was just a subway running underneath the castle. However, when I got home and looked at a map, I saw there *aren't* any subway lines that run below that part of Central Park. The rumbling didn't happen again until a few weeks later. The third time rattled the castle so hard, it shattered windows and left

cracks all over the floor. I was nearly knocked off the balcony I was cleaning. I remember it didn't feel anything like an earthquake or a train, but like something enormous was *hatching* from an invisible egg. I looked up *and that's when I saw it*."

"Saw what?" Conner asked.

"The best way I can describe it is *a window into another world*," Rusty said. "For a brief second I saw a huge forest of evergreen trees and a bright starry sky. It looked like something out of a storybook—couldn't have been more different from the hustle of New York City. Then the window disappeared as fast as it had appeared."

Conner and Bree exchanged a grave look. Without any solid proof, they knew exactly what Rusty had witnessed—*the bridge between worlds was starting to form*.

"I went to the police station and filed a report about what I saw, but none of the officers believed me. A copy of the report was sent to the castle's property manager and they fired me. They thought I had caused all the damages myself and was making up a ridiculous story to cover it up. Word about my police report spread all over town, and no one wanted to hire me after that."

"That's terrible!" Bree said. "Did the window ever appear again?"

"I didn't see it again, but *others* have seen it appear all over the city," Rusty said.

"But *who*? And *where*?" Conner asked.

"You can ask them yourself," Rusty said. "Follow me."

They continued down the Calvin Coolidge Express line. Flickering lights came into view ahead, and soon they discovered a vast underground campsite that was home to dozens and dozens of homeless people. The tunnel was full of tents, sleeping bags, and furniture made from cardboard and newspapers. The homeless people were spread out through the camp in groups; some kept warm standing over blazing trash cans, some played musical instruments, and some watched a man teaching a family of rats to fetch.

Rusty escorted Conner and his friends to a group who sat in the corner of the camp. The group included an older man in a blue suit, a woman in a fur coat, another woman in a Yankees baseball hat, and a third woman

wearing a T-shirt that said READ BANNED BOOKS and tinfoil wrapped around her head. They were gathered around a radio listening to a patchy broadcast.

"There you are, Bagasarian!" the man said. "We heard there was an evacuation in Midtown. We were worried you got swept away."

"Conner and company, allow me to introduce you to my underground family," Rusty said. "This is Jerry Oswald, Annette Crabtree, Judy Harlow, and Roxie Goldberg."

"I hope you aren't from the papers!" Judy said, and hid her face behind the collar of her fur coat. "If I get included in another one of those savage *Where Are They Now* editorials, I'll just die!"

"For the hundredth time, Judy, *you aren't famous*!" Annette said.

"How dare you!" Judy said. "I was on Broadway!"

"It was Off-Broadway, and it was in the eighties," Roxie reminded her. "No one's looking for you now."

"They're not reporters, they're just trying to get inside the public library," Rusty explained. "But since we're passing through, they want to hear your stories about seeing *you know what*."

Rusty's friends were as mortified as if he had just disclosed a nasty secret. They looked around the tunnel to make sure no one else had heard him.

"Why do you always have to bring *that* up?" Jerry asked.

"They'll only mock us like the rest of the world," Judy said.

"Haven't we been through enough already?" Annette asked.

Rusty's friends got to their feet and tried to walk away, but Conner and Bree blocked them from going too far.

"We're not here to insult you," Conner said. "We just want to know what you saw and where you saw it. *Please*, it might help us answer a lot of questions."

"And it's not like you have anything to lose," Red added.

Despite the rude comment from his friend, the homeless people sensed the sincerity in Conner's voice. They looked at one another and shrugged.

"I used to be a maid at the Plaza Hotel," Annette said. "Late one night, I went into the Presidential Suite for the turndown service. As I was making up the bed, the room began shaking. All the furniture was knocked to the

floor and the guests' belongings rolled everywhere. The next thing I knew, a forest appeared out of thin air. It hovered in the sitting room for a few minutes and then vanished. The guests returned shortly after; they saw all their belongings scattered around the floor and accused me of stealing their things. They reported me to the hotel manager and I was fired. Nobody wanted to hire a maid with a history of theft, so now I live down here."

"I was on the verge of a comeback when I saw the forest," Judy said. "I had just been cast as Nurse Number Seven on the soap opera *The Cute and the Complacent*. Anyway, I was sitting in my dressing room at Rockefeller Center—that's where they film the show—when it was hit with a terrible tremor. The forest appeared over my vanity and I screamed for help. By the time a producer came to check on me, it was gone. They thought I was crazy and had my character written out of the script. I've become the laughingstock of the Screen Actors Guild and haven't been hired since."

"I was a teller at National Bank on Forty-Fourth Street," Jerry said. "I was working late one night and went into the vault to store a deposit. Suddenly, the vault started to rattle. It was so powerful it knocked all the deposit boxes open and money spilled onto the floor. The commotion set off the alarm and police arrived within the hour. Had they showed up just a moment sooner, they would have seen the forest for themselves. My boss fired me for carelessness and I couldn't find another job. I told my wife what had happened, but she didn't believe me and threw me out of the house."

Everyone turned to Roxie Goldberg, anxious to hear her story next.

"Why are you looking at me? I never saw a forest appear. I live down here because I hate paying taxes."

Conner sensed there was a pattern to the homeless people's encounters. He paced back and forth as he thought about the information they had provided.

"How long ago did each of you see the forest appear?" he asked.

"Four months ago," Rusty said, then scrunched up his brow. "As a matter of fact, it was four months ago to this very day."

"What a coincidence," Annette said. "I saw it exactly two months ago."

"Precisely *one* month ago for me," Judy said.

"Two weeks," Jerry said.

"And how long did the apparition last?" Conner asked.

“It only lasted a few seconds at the castle,” Rusty said.

“It was quick, but I’d say a minute or two,” Annette said.

“Fifteen minutes at least,” Judy said.

“About forty-five minutes, I suspect,” Jerry said.

“Interesting,” Conner said. “So the sightings are happening faster and faster, and each time the apparition appears, it stays twice as long. If it continues in this pattern, that would put the next sighting *tonight* and it could stick around for an hour or two. I just wish we could tell *where* it’s gonna be.”

An idea popped into Bree’s head and she gasped—startling Jack and Goldilocks beside her.

“Actually, I think the locations may be just as predictable,” she said.

Bree looked around the tunnel and snatched a map off a sleeping homeless person. She spread it against the wall of the tunnel and had Jack and Goldilocks hold it in place.

“Mr. Oswald, what street was National Bank on again?” she asked.

“Forty-Fourth and Fifth Avenue,” Jerry said.

“And Ms. Harlow, where is Rockefeller Center located?”

“Between Forty-Eighth and Fifty-First,” Judy said.

“And the Plaza Hotel?”

“It’s at Fifty-Ninth and Fifth,” Annette said.

“And Rusty, I know there are no streets in Central Park, but if Belvedere Castle *were* on a street, what would it be?” Bree asked.

“That’s easy,” Rusty said. “It’s just north of the Seventy-Ninth Street Transverse.”

Bree pulled a marker out of her pocket and made a note of all the locations. Once she was done, she took a step back and studied the map.

“Just what I thought,” she said. “The bridge first appeared on Seventy-Ninth Street at Belvedere Castle. Next, it appeared at the Plaza Hotel—exactly *twenty blocks* south of the castle. After that, the forest appeared at Rockefeller Center—exactly *ten blocks* south of the hotel. And finally, it appeared at National Bank on Forty-Fourth Street—exactly *five blocks* south of the center. The bridge is traveling in a semistraight line through New York City, and each time it appears, it covers half the ground it did before.”

“So everything *is* a pattern!” Conner said. “That means we can trace

when *and* where the bridge will appear next! According to the formulas, that would place the next appearance tonight at two and a half blocks south of National Bank on Forty-Fourth Street."

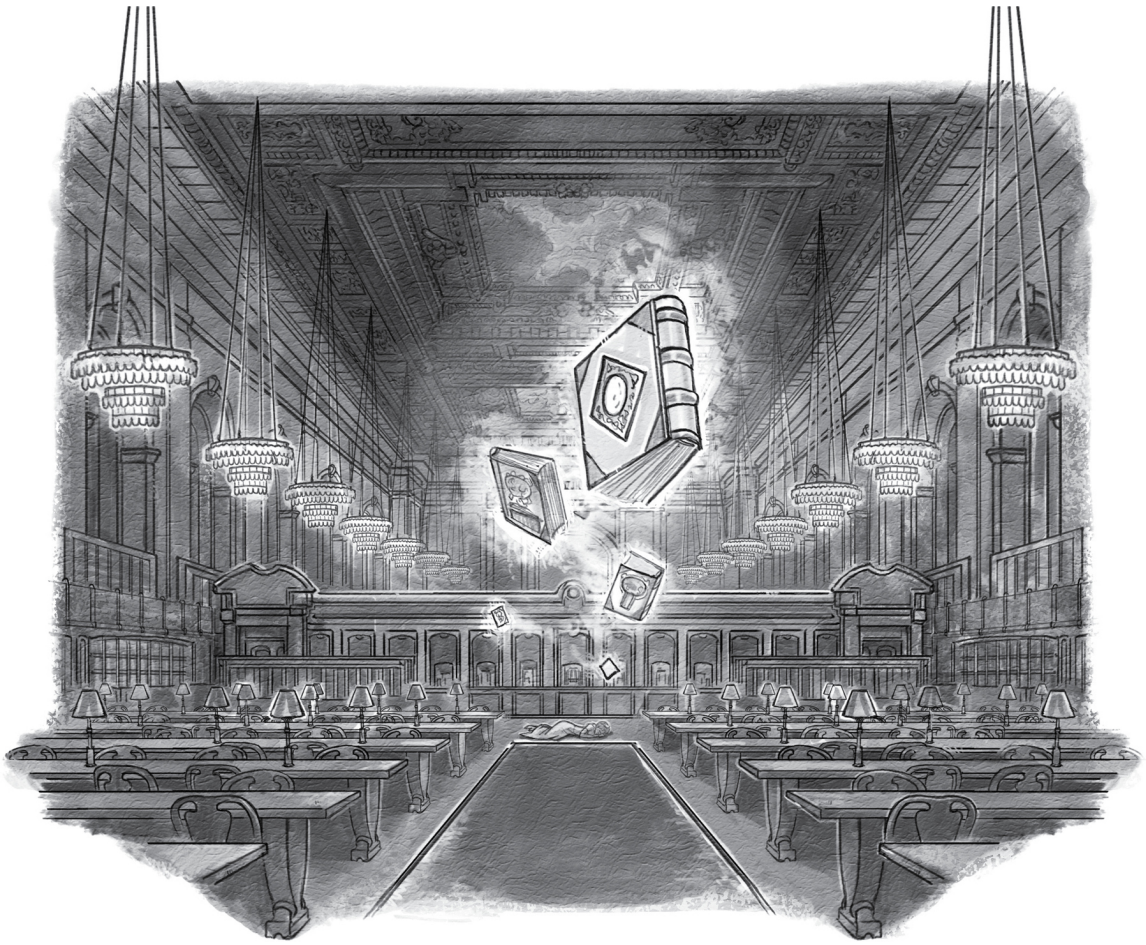
Goldilocks gulped. "So what's located between Forty-First and Forty-Second Street?"

Conner and Bree traced the map, and their fingers arrived at the same spot at the same time. They exchanged a long, fearful glance before turning to the others.

"The New York Public Library," they said in unison.

"This practically confirms everything we've suspected," Bree said. "Whoever took Alex to the library definitely knows about the bridge between worlds. But this time, I don't think it's going anywhere. Just like the Sisters Grimm predicted, this might be the bridge's final stop. Tonight may be the night when *worlds collide*!"

Conner's eyes filled with panic. "Rusty, you've got to take us to the library," he said. *"Now."*



Chapter Nine

THE SCARIEST VILLAIN OF ALL

Conner and his friends charged down the Calvin Coolidge Express tunnel as Rusty led them deeper through the abandoned subway. The homeless man ran so fast he could barely keep his flashlight steady, but even in the dark, Rusty knew the tunnel like the back of his hand. Eventually they arrived at the construction site of a small subway platform that had never been finished. Ladders, tools, and paint buckets had remained untouched since the project was halted in the 1920s.

"See that hatch above the platform?" Rusty asked, and aimed his flashlight at a circular door in the ceiling. "Climb through it and it'll take you into the lower level of the library."

"Thanks for bringing us here, Rusty," Conner said. "If we're able to save my sister, it'll be all because of you. I wish I had something to repay you with."

"It's been a long time since I felt useful," the homeless man said with a smile. "That's all the thanks I need. Good luck finding your sister, kid."

Conner and his friends shook Rusty's hand and climbed onto the unfinished platform. Jack retrieved a ladder and positioned it directly below the hatch. He climbed up the ladder and attempted to open it, but the door wouldn't budge.

"It's stuck," he called down.

"It's been nearly a century since it was opened," Rusty said. "It may need a good push."

Taking his advice, Jack pressed his back against the hatch and pushed

against it with all his might. The door opened with a loud crunch, and pieces of wood fell from the ceiling. Opening the hatch punched a large hole through the floorboards and carpet above it. Jack climbed through the hole and then helped the others through the floor of the library's lower level.

The gang emerged inside a long room with colorful walls. It was filled with tiny bookshelves and miniature tables and chairs. Paintings and stuffed animals of classic literary characters smiled down at them from every corner.

"Oh my," Red said. "I didn't realize this was a library for dwarfs."

"This is the children's center," Bree said. "There's a lot more than this."

"How big is the library?" Goldilocks asked.

"It's 646,680 square feet, to be exact," Bree said. "There are four levels with over forty rooms open to the public."

Her friends were surprised she had the information so readily available.

"How do you know all that?" Red asked.

"The plane had Wi-Fi," Bree said with a shrug.

Any knowledge about the structure was useful to them, but Conner's stomach filled with knots once he heard how big the library was. Whoever had taken his sister had plenty of corners to lurk in.

"Should we split up and look for her?" Jack asked.

"No, let's stay together," Conner said. "I don't want to give Alex's kidnapper the chance to knock us off one by one—sorry, I've seen too many horror movies. We'll search each level, one room at a time, until we find her."

Conner's friends nodded and followed him out of the children's center. If they had any doubts about Alex's whereabouts, they quickly subsided as they stepped into the hallway. All the walls and floors of the library were covered in thick vines and ivy. The plants were covered in vibrant flowers that bloomed as Conner and his friends passed them. Exotic butterflies fluttered through the air from blossom to blossom. In just a matter of hours, Alex had enchanted the national landmark so that it resembled an ancient temple in the middle of a jungle.

"Strange," Jack observed. "It reminds me of when the Enchantress attacked the Eastern Kingdom and covered it in plants just like this."

"Let's pray that's where the similarities end," Goldilocks said.

They walked in a tight group as they explored the lower level of the library. Jack gripped his axe, Goldilocks drew her sword, and Red clung to her can of Febreze as they went. With all their eyes put together, there wasn't an inch of the lower level they didn't scan.

Once the lower level had been searched, they slowly moved up the stone staircase to the first floor. They searched behind every pillar and beneath each archway of the entrance hall. They looked through the aisles of merchandise in the gift shop and under all the desks in the state-of-the-art education center but found nothing out of the ordinary besides vines and ivy.

They journeyed to the next floor of the spacious structure and searched all the galleries, corridors, and research rooms. Once that level had been inspected, they climbed the stairs to the top level. They found portraits and murals, candelabras and statues, but not a trace of Alex anywhere. Soon there was only one room left to search. Conner and his friends gathered at the doors, and each took a deep breath before going inside—*this was it*.

The Rose Main Reading Room was the largest and most recognizable room in the New York Public Library. Although Conner and Bree had never seen it in person, they instantly remembered seeing it in movies and television. The room was filled with dozens of hanging chandeliers and two rows of wide tables. The high ceiling was made of beautiful wood carvings that framed painted murals of cloudy skies. The walls were lined with arched windows and two levels of bookshelves. However, all the shelves were empty because the books were floating magically through the air like a thousand balloons.

At the far end of the long room, between the rows of tables, they found Alex asleep on the floor. As soon as he laid eyes on her, Conner ran to his sister's side and scooped her up in his arms. Her face was paler than he had ever seen it and her skin felt cold as ice.

"Alex, it's me—it's Conner!" he said. "We've found you and we've come to take you home!"

Conner brushed the hair out of her face, but Alex didn't open her eyes.

"Alex, can you hear me?" he asked.

He gave her a gentle nudge, but his sister didn't open her eyes or move a muscle. Conner listened to her chest to make sure she was breathing and then checked her pulse.

"She's alive," he said. "But barely."

"Why isn't she responding?" Bree asked.

"She must be under some sort of spell," Conner said, and tapped the side of her face. "Alex, you have to fight this off so we can help you! Who's doing this to you? Who's making you enchant things and attack people?"

"She won't wake up unless I *tell* her to wake up."

Conner, Bree, Jack, Goldilocks, and Red turned to the other side of the room and discovered they weren't alone. A woman in a long black cloak, with red lips and horns like a ram, appeared out of thin air.

"Morina!" Goldilocks said. "It's *you—you're* the one who's behind all this!"

Just the sight of her filled Red with rage, and she charged toward the witch with her fists raised.

"You no-good, grass-eating, udder-sucking, hoof-stomping, wedding-crashing, friend-stealing piece of fertilizer!" she yelled. *"How dare you take my fiancé AND my friend! I'm going to rip those hideous horns right off your—"*

Morina waved her hand like she was swatting a fly, and Red went soaring across the room and landed on the second level of bookshelves. Red used the railing to get to her feet, but the metal bars magically wrapped around her body and held her in place. Morina waved her hands at the others, and they flew to the railing beside Red and were also restrained by its metal bars. Conner tried to hold on to his sister as he was forced through the air, but she slipped out of his arms and rolled back to the floor.

"I must say I'm impressed," Morina said. "I figured you might follow us, but I never expected you to make it inside the building."

"We know what you're doing here!" Bree said. "We know all about the bridge between worlds and the witches' plan to cross through it and conquer the Otherworld!"

"But you won't get away with it!" Conner said. "You and the witches won't stand a chance against this world!"

"Well, of course not," Morina said. "That's why we cursed your sister. Now that we're in control of her powers, dominating the Otherworld will be much easier. By the way, *Alex*, it's time to wake up now. Our guests will be arriving soon."

Alex levitated off the floor and onto her feet. She opened her eyes and

they began to glow like lightning. Her hair rose above her head and flickered like the flames of a slow-motion fire. Once she was awake, all the books floating through the air suddenly dropped and rained down on the reading room.

"What have you done to her?" Conner yelled.

"Isn't it obvious?" Morina asked. "We cursed her just like we cursed the Enchantress."

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "Ezmia wasn't *cursed*! She became the Enchantress because she was greedy, selfish, and evil!"

"Every woman has an evil enchantress inside her—all it takes is a little curse to bring it out," Morina said. "Your sister is no exception."

"I don't believe you," Conner said. "What kind of magic could do such a thing?"

"Actually, it's an interesting story," Morina said. "You see, years and years ago, the Snow Queen and the Sea Witch discovered the Otherworld around the same time as the fairies. While the late Fairy Godmother and the Fairy Council traveled back and forth spreading stories and granting wishes in the Otherworld, the witches got together and formed a plan to conquer it. The Snow Queen and the Sea Witch weren't powerful enough to do it on their own, so they cursed little Ezmia with dust made from the glass of an evil magic mirror. It got in Ezmia's eyes and lungs and cursed her to feel anger, sorrow, and jealousy tenfold—turning her into the Enchantress we remember today. The Snow Queen and the Sea Witch were planning to use Ezmia as a weapon against the Otherworld—but sadly, Ezmia perished before they had the chance. Once the Enchantress was dead, the Snow Queen and the Sea Witch set their sights on Alex. After a couple of attempts to curse her, they realized how much stronger she was than Ezmia. It took over ten times the amount of dust for the curse to even stick."

"That's why Alex destroyed the Witches' Brew and attacked the Fairy Council!" Conner said, understanding for the first time. "She wasn't having difficulty controlling her powers because she was overwhelmed—she was being cursed!"

"Such a good little detective," the witch said. "Luckily, the Snow Queen and the Sea Witch learned from their mistakes with Ezmia. This time, they hexed the dust so they'd have total control over whoever ingested it. Now your sister, one of the most powerful fairies ever to grace the known worlds,

is a creature of rage, torment, and despair."

Conner and his friends were livid. They fought against the metal bars restraining them, but it was no use.

"You still won't win!" he shouted. "It's going to take much more than my sister and a bunch of witches to take over the Otherworld! We have armies and weapons you can't even dream of! They'll wipe you out the moment you step outside this library!"

Morina rolled her eyes as if she had heard this spiel multiple times.

"Oh yes, I know all about *those*," she said. "Unfortunately for you, I've planned accordingly. You see, the other witches have no idea what kind of world they're about to walk into. The Otherworld was *vastly* different when the Snow Queen and the Sea Witch first discovered it—they don't realize how *advanced* it's become. The witches and your sister are merely pawns in my plan to weaken the armies of this world. Once they've been wounded, my *own* army will arrive and finish them off."

"What army?" Conner asked.

The witch threw her head back and roared with laughter. "Don't tell me you haven't figured that part out yet," she said.

Goldilocks gasped. "Conner, she's talking about *the Literary Army*! She's going to bring them through the bridge, too! That's why they were lingering around the Northern Palace—it wasn't a scare tactic, they were waiting for *her*!"

Of all the possibilities Conner had predicted over the last week, this outcome had completely escaped him. Apparently, they wouldn't need to travel into the fairy-tale world after all—the Literary Army was coming to *them*.

"It's still not enough to defeat the Otherworld!" Conner said. "Both sides will just keep fighting until there's nothing left!"

"And perhaps *that's* been my plan all along," Morina said. "The fairies have been turned into stone, soon all the witches will be slaughtered, the armies of the Otherworld will be defeated, and the Literary Army will be destroyed in the process. That leaves both worlds entirely defenseless and ready for new leadership—leadership from someone *like me*."

Conner glared at her with the most hateful gaze he had ever sent anyone in his life. He couldn't believe one person was capable of so much manipulation.

“Millions of innocent people are going to die because of you, and there won’t be a drop of blood on your hands,” he said. “I’d say you’re a monster, but that’s not fair to monsters.”

Morina was tickled by that notion, and a sinister smile spread across her face. “I may not be the most powerful enemy you’ve made, but I’m certainly the smartest—and *that* makes me the scariest of them all,” she said.

A small clock over the entryway struck midnight, and the Rose Main Reading Room began to vibrate.

“Well, it’s been such a *thrill* catching up, but I’m afraid you’ll all have to be quiet now,” Morina said. “I don’t want you spilling any secrets to our guests.”

The witch snapped her fingers, and the metal bars confining them snaked around their mouths. Conner and his friends looked at one another in panic, but there was nothing they could do. Whether they liked it or not, the bridge between worlds was about to appear.

What started off as a light rumbling sensation quickly escalated into a thunderous tremor. The room shook so violently that the windows shattered and the walls began to crack. The chandeliers swung like wrecking balls before crashing to the floor. The tables slid and slammed into one another like bumper cars, and many of the bookshelves collapsed.

Suddenly, an enormous ghostly orb descended from the ceiling. It glided through the air and landed at the far end of the room. The orb stretched into a wide oval and gained color and depth, as if invisible paintbrushes were painting it. With every passing second, the image of a vast forest became clearer and clearer. Soon the image was so vibrant it didn’t look like a painting of a forest, but a *doorway* to one.

The witches of the fairy-tale world peered through the opening and took their first steps into the Otherworld. Arboris, Tarantulene, Serpentina, Charcoaline, and Rat Mary led the charge and were followed by hundreds of other grotesque women. Some flew into the library on broomsticks, some galloped with hooved feet, and some crawled inside on all fours.

A wave of salty seawater spilled into the library and swirled around the room like a living serpent. The Sea Witch rode the wave into the Otherworld perched on her coral sleigh, which was pulled by a school of sharks. A sudden chill filled the air, and the Snow Queen emerged through

the bridge aboard a sleigh pulled by two ferocious polar bears.

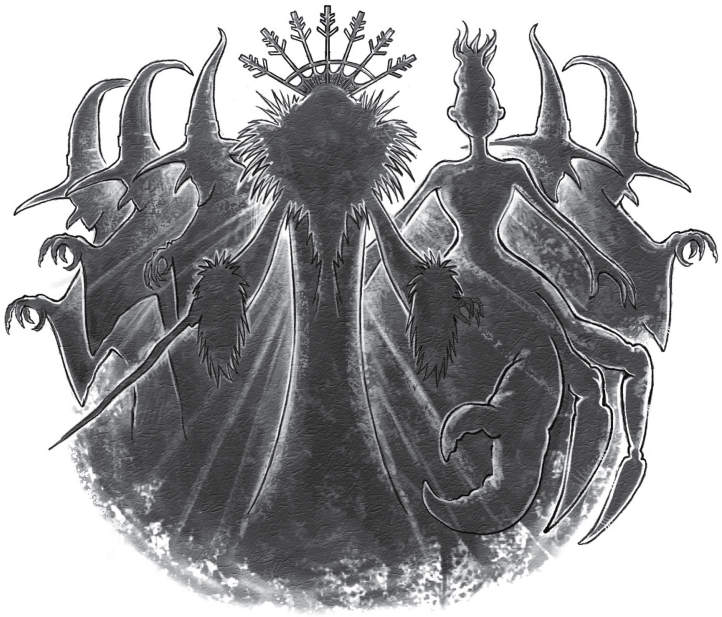
"Your Excellencies," Morina said with a shallow bow. "I'm so glad you've both successfully made it through the bridge. Just as promised, I have found the Bailey girl and cursed her with the dust from the magic mirror. With her power at our disposal, the Otherworld will be ours in no time."

The Snow Queen and the Sea Witch were shocked that Morina had pulled it off.

"Well done, Morina," the Sea Witch said. "I have to admit, we're pleasantly surprised by your competence."

The witches were so excited to finally be in the Otherworld that they didn't even notice the people tangled in the railing above them. Conner and his friends tried to warn the witches that they were walking into a trap, but they couldn't form words with the metal bars around their mouths.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" the Snow Queen screeched. *"We have a world to conquer!"*



CHAPTER TEN

THE WITCHES ARRIVE

By midnight, over a thousand US Marines had joined General Wilson on Fifth Avenue. The soldiers surrounded the New York Public Library on all four sides, but it was impossible to get close. Whenever a Marine came within ten feet of the building, he or she was quickly knocked back by one of the lion statues. Even if a soldier was on the opposite side of the structure, a lion would crawl over the building and swat the soldier away before he or she could enter.

The general watched the statues from behind a wall of sandbags in the middle of Fifth Avenue. He took a long drag from his twelfth cigar of the night and decided it was time to take action.

"All right, enough cat games!" he said to his soldiers. "I want both those lions blown to bits! Open fire on the count of three… *One… Two… Three!*"

The Marines unleashed tremendous firepower on the national landmarks. Bullets came from soldiers on all sides of the library and from snipers stationed on the rooftops nearby. The statues were shot until they crumbled into pieces and the front steps of the library were covered in their stony debris.

"Hold your fire!" the general ordered, and the shooting ceased. "Inspect the damage!"

A soldier ran up the front steps of the library and examined the debris.

"All clear, sir," he called out.

"Good," the general said. "Now send in the platoon to find the girl. If she resists arrest or retaliates with an assault, you are to terminate her

immediately. That is an order, do you copy?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" the soldiers responded.

As the platoon charged up the library's front steps, they came to a sudden halt. As if the destruction of the statues were being rewound before their eyes, the debris magically reassembled piece by piece until both lion statues were fully formed again—*and the felines weren't happy*. The lions roared with such gusto that many of the soldiers' helmets flew off. With one powerful blow, the platoon was knocked down the library's steps and the soldiers rolled into the street.

"Holy reincarnation!" the general said, and the cigar fell from his mouth.

In over six decades serving in the United States Armed Forces, General Wilson had never encountered anything like *this*. The stone felines were putting up the greatest defense he had ever witnessed.

Suddenly, all three double doors at the library's entrance were blasted open from inside. Alex and the witches emerged and stood on the front steps with the lions. The witches looked around Fifth Avenue in wonder. The Otherworld was so much bigger and brighter than they'd thought. They'd expected a world similar to their own, but instead were standing in a metropolis of lights and concrete beyond their wildest dreams.

The soldiers looked at one another with the same dumbfounded expression: *Where did they all come from?* General Wilson picked up a megaphone to speak to the mysterious women.

"This is United States Marine Corps General Gunther Wilson," he said. "Whoever you are and wherever you came from, you are interfering in a matter of national security. Put your hands up and come quietly or you'll be taken by force."

The witches shared a cackle—unaware of who the soldiers were or what they were capable of.

"You heard the man, sisters," the Snow Queen screeched. *"It's time to put our hands up."*

The witch raised her hands into the air, and hundreds of enormous icicles shot up from the ground. They were so sharp that they flattened the tires of all the Hummers on the street and nearly impaled many of the soldiers.

"Attack!" the Snow Queen screeched. *"The Otherworld is ours!"*

The witches squealed in celebration and their invasion began.

The Sea Witch rode her rogue wave around the library and threw pieces of coral at the nearby soldiers. The coral latched on to their uniforms and grew rapidly around their bodies, binding their arms and legs.

Rat Mary placed open palms on the ground, closed her eyes, and whispered a spell to summon all the rats in the area. To her surprise, *thousands* of rodents crawled out of the sewers and drains, the trash cans and subways, and joined her on the front steps of the library. She directed them toward the soldiers, and the rats pounced on them like a plague of locusts.

Arboris pointed to the trees beside the library's steps. All the leaves flew from the branches into the air and rained down on the soldiers. The leaves poked and stung the soldiers like swarms of killer bees.

Smoke steamed out of Charcoaline's ears, and the cracks of her ashy skin filled with magma. A fiery geyser erupted from her mouth like a volcano, and she aimed the blast at the general. He and his soldiers dived out of the way, and their wall of sandbags exploded.

The Marines had never been trained for such attacks. They were so shocked by the witches' magic, they were practically paralyzed and didn't know how to retaliate.

"Sir? What do we do?" a soldier asked the general.

"Shoot them!" the general ordered. *"Shoot them all!"*

The witches didn't recognize the weapons the Marines were aiming in their direction. By the time they realized the objects were firearms, the soldiers had already started firing. A split second before the witches would have been shot and slaughtered on the steps of the library, Alex raised a hand, and the bullets bounced off a magical force field.

When the general realized the soldiers were wasting their bullets, he motioned for them to hold their fire. The Marines lowered their weapons and stared at Alex's magic in amazement. The Sea Witch picked a steaming bullet off the ground with her claw and examined it with her large black eyes.

"The Otherworld is not the same place it was when we discovered it," she said with a nasty scowl.

The Sea Witch held the bullet to the Snow Queen's nose. The blind witch smelled it and her brow tightened.

"They've *evolved*," she screeched. "Where is Morina? Why didn't she

warn us about their development?"

The witches looked around the front steps and the entrance hall of the library, but Morina was nowhere to be found.

"She's tricked us!" Rat Mary yelled.

"Morina's sent us to our death!" Charcoaline moaned.

"How could ssshe betray usss like thisss?" Serpentina hissed.

"Silence, you fools!" the Snow Queen ordered. "We will not perish because of Morina or any human of the Otherworld! We aren't prepared for this battle—but mark my words, by sundown we will be ready for the war! All we need is a place to retreat until we gain our strength!"

The Sea Witch looked up Fifth Avenue and pointed to the southeast corner of Central Park in the distance.

"Look, up there!" she said. "It's a *forest*! I say we take cover in the woods until we are ready!"

"Yes, perfect!" the Snow Queen screeched, and turned to Alex. *"Lead the way!"*

At the witch's command, Alex clapped her hands and all the remaining soldiers went flying out of their way. She snapped her fingers and all the Hummers, the police vehicles, the lampposts, the street signs, the trash cans, and everything else in their path disintegrated into piles of ash. In one swift procession, the witches, the lion statues, and Alex marched up Fifth Avenue toward Central Park.

Once they arrived, Alex waved her hand through the air and a massive force field surrounded the entire park like a shimmering, rippling dome. The Marines tried to follow the witches into the park, but Alex's shield electrocuted anyone who got near it: *No one was going in or out.*

Alex, the lion statues, and all the witches continued their march into the heart of Central Park and disappeared from the Marines' sight. The soldiers had thought they'd seen just about everything with the moving statues, but clearly, the spectacles had only begun.

"Your orders, sir?" a soldier asked the general.

General Wilson didn't respond. He was just as stunned by the night's events as the rest of the Marines. He was going to need help with the situation, and there was only one person he could get it from.

"Sir? Your orders?"

"I'm thinking, Sergeant, I'm thinking!" the general snapped, and paced

as he thought. “The whole island of Manhattan needs to be evacuated at once! Call the Pentagon and tell them we need backup! We need as many boots on the ground as possible!”

“Yes, sir!” the soldier responded.

“Oh, and Sergeant?” the general said. “One more thing—and this is the most important order of the night: *Find Cornelia Grimm—immediately!*”

Chapter Eleven

A MIRRORED ESCAPE

After a thorough inspection of all the mirrors in the Center Kingdom castle, Froggy and his mysterious young companion discovered that the castle was as empty as the mirror dimension itself. Judging by all the damaged furniture and broken artwork, the Literary Army had swept the castle and taken all the servants to the Northern Kingdom during their invasion. Most concerning of all, however, was how little Froggy recognized his former home. They peered into the chambers where he used to sleep, the dining room where he used to eat, and the library where he'd spent hours each day reading—but nothing sparked the tiniest inkling of familiarity.

"I know I used to live here, but no matter how many times I remind myself, it still seems like the home of a stranger," Froggy said.

"Where else could your friends be hiding?" the little girl asked.

Froggy tried to think of an alternative hiding spot, but he had a difficult time remembering the names of other locations altogether.

"Let's search the village outside the castle," he said. "Perhaps they're hiding somewhere less conspicuous, like one of the shops or farms."

"What are their names? I forgot to ask."

Froggy opened his mouth to respond, but the right words never emerged.

"I suppose I forgot," he said with a deep sigh. "But I'll recognize them the moment we see them. They've got strawberry-blonde hair, blue eyes, and freckles. The boy has chubby cheeks and the girl always wears her hair neatly behind a headband—or at least that's how they looked when they

were twelve. I know they've matured since then, but I can't picture it."

"It's all right," the little girl reassured him. "How many twins can there be who match that description? We'll find them soon enough."

A new cluster of mirrors manifested in the distance, and they hurried to inspect them. Froggy and the little girl checked all the homes, shops, bakeries, taverns, and barns in the Center Kingdom village, but they were just as empty as the castle. They were certain the Literary Army had rounded up all the villagers, too—but an unexpected noise told them otherwise.

Froggy and the little girl followed the sound of sniffling to a mirror hung inside a small cottage. They peered inside and found a short, frumpy woman with curly red hair and a large nose. She looked at her reflection in the mirror like it was someone she despised. The woman tried smoothing the wrinkles on her forehead, flattening the bags under her eyes, and stretching her double chin as if the skin on her face were made of clay. Naturally, the adjustments never lasted, and the woman cried harder after each failed attempt.

Froggy stayed out of sight so he wouldn't frighten the woman, but the little girl was drawn to her like a magnet—*desperate* to help.

"Why are you crying?" she asked.

The woman screamed at the strange little girl appearing in the mirror. She quickly turned to look over her shoulder, expecting to find the little girl standing behind her. When she realized that the girl was only a reflection, the woman screamed again.

"How did you get inside there?" she asked. "Are you a ghost?"

"No, just cursed," the little girl replied. "I've been trapped inside the mirror for a very long time. And from the looks of it, so have *you*."

"But… but… but what is that supposed to mean?" the woman asked.

"I saw the way you were looking into the mirror just now," the little girl said. "You looked at your own face with such hatred and heartbreak. You nearly hurt yourself trying to change your appearance with your hands. If you dislike your looks to the point of hating and harming yourself, I'd say you're just as cursed and trapped in the mirror as I am."

The woman was still shocked to be speaking with a reflection, but even more overwhelmed to be analyzed by one. Tears formed in her eyes again, but this time from embarrassment.

“You’ve caught me in a very vulnerable moment, my dear,” the woman said. “What is your name?”

“I don’t know,” the little girl said. “All I know is what I see, and someone should never be so distraught over something they can’t control.”

“I agree, but it isn’t right to make judgments over one moment of weakness, either,” the woman said. “My appearance has always given me grief, but that isn’t the only reason I’m unhappy. My whole family was recently captured by that terrible army and taken to the Northern Kingdom. I was crying because I miss them dearly and am worried sick.”

“Then why were you trying to change your looks?” the little girl asked.

“Because I desperately want to save them, but my looks are holding me back,” the woman confessed. “I’m the only one in our village who escaped the army, but there are others like me in the towns nearby. I believe if we joined together we could create a plan to rescue our loved ones. However, I’m afraid no one will take me seriously because of my appearance—and I have a lifetime of experiences to validate that fear.”

Froggy was certain the woman’s situation would be far too complicated for the little girl’s expertise, but even in this dilemma, the girl knew the exact advice to give.

“No one ever changed the world by being beautiful,” she said. “If you want to make a difference, you can’t let something as trivial as *appearance* get in your way. A daisy doesn’t need the roses’ permission to bloom—and neither do you.”

“I may not need permission, but I do need support,” the woman argued. “I can’t fight an army on my own—I’ll need others to join me. But I’m afraid they’ll only see my looks and won’t listen to my words. I’m afraid they’ll only laugh at my hopes of rescuing my loved ones.”

The little girl placed her hands on her hips and stared at the woman with the confidence of someone twice her age.

“Only idiots listen with their eyes,” she said. “If people don’t hear your words, then *shout* them. If people silence you, then write your message with fire. Demanding respect is never easy, but if something you love is at stake, then I’d say it’s worth the price. Besides, if you can’t get villagers to take you seriously, you’ll never defeat an army! Sometimes we’re meant to face the demons at home so we know how to fight the demons abroad.”

The little girl had waited years to give someone that advice, and it

appeared to do the trick. As if a sudden electric charge had run through the woman's body, she stood taller and straighter, and her eyes beamed with determination.

"You're right, child," she said. "With all the energy I've wasted moping in front of the mirror, I could have accomplished great things by now. Well, I'm going to stop moping at once and get to work."

The woman was so reenergized that her hands trembled as she gathered her coat and her hat. She was so eager to begin that she completely forgot she wasn't alone. Only when the woman had one foot out the door did she remember that the little girl was still standing in the mirror.

"Thank you for the encouragement," the woman said. "Whatever curse you're under, I hope someone can free you from the mirror. You've certainly freed me."

The woman left her cottage and hurried to the next village at a determined pace. Froggy was floored by the little girl's counseling abilities. He applauded her and they journeyed away from the cottage mirror.

"That was quite the motivational speech," he said. "With just a few words, you may have changed that woman's life forever. Boy, I sure wish our paths had crossed when I was younger. I could have used that same inspirational—"

Suddenly, the cottage mirror behind them started to glow. It became brighter and brighter until it shined with the power of the sun. Froggy and the little girl both shielded their eyes from the strange phenomenon.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I've never seen a mirror do that before!"

Rays of light shot out from the mirror like ribbons and wrapped around the little girl's wrists, ankles, and waist. The light pulled her closer and closer to the mirror until her body was pressed against the glass. Just when Froggy didn't think she could go any farther, the little girl passed through the plate of glass as if it were a sheet of water. She collapsed on the cottage floor, and all the light faded. Froggy tried to follow her, but the glass between worlds became solid again.

"You're on the other side!" Froggy exclaimed. "You've been *freed*!"

"But how?" she asked in disbelief. "What broke the spell?"

Froggy thought about it, but it was a mystery to him, too. There was only one possible conclusion he could come up with.

“Maybe it’s just like the woman said,” he suggested. “Perhaps the key to freeing yourself from the mirror is freeing someone else first.”

The little girl got to her feet, but when she turned back to the mirror, she wasn’t a little girl anymore. A beautiful middle-aged woman with long raven hair was now standing before Froggy.

“I’m so *old*,” she said. “Why have I aged so much?”

“This must be the age you were when you went inside the mirror,” Froggy said. “The longer you were trapped, the more you faded into a little girl.”

The woman stared at her reflection, and after a moment, it astonished her. She looked into her own eyes as if she were seeing a long-lost friend. Suddenly, a wave of memories illuminated her mind like a swarm of fireflies flying into a dark cave.

“I *remember*,” she said. “I remember where I was born, I remember where I grew up, I remember all the places I lived, I remember the faces of my loved ones… and I remember my *name*.”

“What is it?” Froggy asked.

“Evly,” she gasped.

Her face quickly filled with shame upon the discovery. It was so overwhelming that she had to take a seat on a small stool.

“Why the long face? This should be a happy moment for you.”

“Because it wasn’t the *only* name I had,” Evly said.

She walked around the cottage and recited her memories as they came to her, as if she were narrating a film she saw behind her eyelids.

“When I was very young, I was kidnapped by an evil enchantress and forced to work as her slave. I was deeply in love with a young man named Mira, who tried to rescue me. The Enchantress caught Mira and imprisoned him inside a magic mirror as punishment. I was devastated and quickly planned my own escape from her. I poisoned the Enchantress and ran far away, dragging Mira’s mirror into the forest beside me. And then I made a decision that turned me into a *monster*….”

Froggy laughed. “I have a hard time believing that.”

“No, I mean it,” Evly said. “I was so heartbroken over Mira, I had a witch cut out my heart and turn it into stone. It made all the pain go away, but it also turned me into an irrational, unsympathetic, and cruel woman. I devoted the rest of my heartless life to freeing Mira from the mirror. I

married a king in hopes of using his resources, and I tried killing my stepdaughter. The world found out and hated me for it, and I became known throughout the kingdoms as *the Evil Queen*…."

The name should have sent shivers down Froggy's spine, but he remained completely unaffected. He listened to Evly's memories as if they were a story he had never been told, completely unaware that the two of them shared some of these memories.

"Years later, I tried freeing Mira using the Wishing Spell. By the time I collected all the items the spell needed, Mira had faded into nothing but a reflection. He died in my arms just a few moments after being freed. There was a big battle at the time. Soldiers had found me in an abandoned castle, cannons were being blasted outside, the castle began to crumble. The magic mirror crashed over me and I've been trapped inside ever since."

Evly covered her eyes and cried as if the story she had been watching had come to a tragic ending.

"And what about your heart?" Froggy asked. "Is it still made of stone?"

Evly placed a hand over her chest and gasped.

"No, I can feel it beating!" she said. "How is this possible? What sort of magic could restore someone's heart?"

"I understand completely," Froggy said with a smile. "It's called a *second chance*. After a lifetime of sorrow, the mirror dimension has granted you an opportunity to start over."

"I don't deserve a second chance," Evly said. "After all the pain I've caused over the years, I deserve to spend eternity inside a prison cell."

"Then perhaps it's a chance for *redemption*," he suggested. "You were too late to free Mira, but that doesn't mean it's too late for everyone else. There are plenty of people who feel trapped in the mirror and could use all the advice you've been storing."

"But why me?" Evly asked. "Surely there are much more suitable candidates than an evil queen."

"Well, maybe not," Froggy said. "Maybe you were meant to go through all that pain and heartbreak so you could save others from their own. Maybe the Evil Queen is just a chapter in your life and not the whole story. Maybe the world has dreamed bigger plans for you than you've dreamed for yourself."

Tears filled Evly's eyes as she thought it over. It was difficult to accept

kindness from a world she thought so cruel.

“I should take my own advice and stop feeling sorry over the things I can’t control,” she said. “Thank you for guiding me through it. As much as I’d like to continue looking for your friends, I suppose I’m quite useless to you from this side of the glass. Good luck to you, whoever you are.”

Evly kissed the mirror near Froggy’s cheek and left the cottage, taking her first steps toward a new beginning. Once she was gone, Froggy left the mirror and wandered into the darkness of the mirror dimension.

“What a nice lady,” he said to himself. “I wonder which friends she was talking about….”

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE UNEXPECTED RESCUERS

Conner and his friends could hear the commotion between the witches and the Marines as if it were happening right in front of them. It was terrifying knowing his sister was outside in the line of gunfire, and pure torture knowing there was nothing he could do to help her. Conner fought against the metal bars wrapped around his body until his skin bruised, but the railing never budged.

Just as a thunderous round of gunfire commenced, Morina reappeared in the Rose Main Reading Room. She sauntered through the room to the bridge between worlds without even looking at the captives twisted in the railing above her. Conner and the others called her every foul name they could think of as she passed by, but the metal bars across their mouths muffled their words.

"Save your strength—you're going to be up there for a *very* long time," Morina said with a laugh. "Now that my pawns are in place, it's time to secure a checkmate. Enjoy these moments while you can—it'll be the last time the Otherworld belongs to you."

Morina blew them each a kiss and the metal bars wrapped around their bodies even more tightly. The witch stepped into the fairy-tale world and disappeared in the forest on the other side.

Conner and his friends squirmed in their painful constraints. They were pinned so tightly they could barely breathe and were starting to lose feeling in their limbs. Hero was woken by his mother's frantic twisting and began to cry—but the infant's crying was drowned out by Red's high-pitched

weeping.

There hadn't been many moments in Conner's life when he'd felt completely out of luck, but this was one of them. With his sister under a terrible curse, his friends imprisoned around him, and no way to contact anyone outside the library, Conner thought the Otherworld might be doomed.

Suddenly, the conflict outside went dead silent and Conner feared the worst. Either the Marines had exterminated the witches and his sister, or the battle had moved. Footsteps entered the Rose Main Reading Room, and Conner worried that the witches were retreating into the library. Since his head was stuck facing forward, he looked out of the corners of his eyes until the muscles in his sockets were strained. He saw the shapes of four familiar young women—and they were the *last* people on earth he was expecting to find.

"As I live and breathe," said a familiar voice. "If it isn't *Conner Bailey*… and he's *exactly* where I've always wanted him—vulnerable and in need of a favor!"

Mindy, Cindy, Lindy, and Wendy walked farther into the Rose Main Reading Room and stood where Conner and the others could see them clearly. The Book Huggers stared up at him and his friends with matching smirks, crossed arms, and devious expressions. The teenage girls looked like vultures surrounding a pack of injured animals.

"Hmm hmmhmhm?" Bree mumbled in disbelief.

"Oh, look, girls!" Cindy said. "Bree Campbell and Conner are in a suspicious circumstance together! What a surprise—*NOT!*"

"Hmmmm hmm hm hmm hmmm!" Conner grunted.

"What's that, Conner? After all these years you finally have *something to say*?" Mindy asked. "Wish I could hear you through the all *lies* and *trickery* you've planted in my head!"

"HMMM HMM HMMM!" Conner grunted angrily.

"Lindy, go back to the abandoned subway tunnel," Mindy ordered. "I believe there was a handsaw on the platform. That should help Conner *loosen his lips*."

Lindy followed the command and promptly left the reading room. Conner wasn't sure if the Book Huggers' plan was to free him or torture him with the saw, and judging by their questionable behavior in the past,

either was possible. A few minutes later Lindy returned carrying a foot-long handsaw like it was a poisonous snake.

"Great work. Now remove the bar covering his mouth," Mindy instructed.

Lindy paused nervously. "Maybe Wendy should do this? She was the only one of us who didn't fail woodshop."

Wendy nodded confidently and took the tool from her friend. The quietest Book Hugger placed the handsaw between her teeth and climbed a bookshelf toward Conner like a pirate ascending the side of a ship. With two quick strikes on each side, the metal bar across Conner's face fell to the floor.

"What the HECK are you guys doing here?" he asked.

"We're on vacation with our families," Cindy said. "That *was*, until we saw you in a taxi outside Cheesy Street! Then pleasure quickly turned into business."

"We've been following you ever since," Lindy said. "We told our parents the pizza bagels gave us diarrhea. They still think we're in the bathroom."

"The homeless janitor didn't want to tell us where you went, but his friends weren't so loyal," Mindy said. "They sang like canaries for a couple of granola bars and a box of Tic Tacs."

Conner had never thought he'd be so grateful for his eccentric stalkers. Usually he found just the mention of the Book Huggers quite repulsive, but now he looked upon the girls as if they were each wearing a superhero's cape. They were his only hope of rescuing Alex and saving the Otherworld.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I'm *genuinely* happy to see you guys," Conner said with a thankful smile. "Now you've got to saw off the rest of these bars and let me down! It's kind of an emergency!"

Wendy started sawing the bars around Conner's legs, but Mindy held up a hand to stop her.

"As much as it pains me to see you like this, I'm afraid we can't help you just yet," Mindy said. "You see, we've had questions about you and your sister for a long time now—questions only *you* can answer. So if you want us to scratch your back, you've got to scratch ours first."

"Are you crazy?" Conner snapped. "I just said it's an emergency! People are going to get hurt unless you help me down!"

“PEOPLE HAVE ALREADY BEEN HURT!” Mindy yelled, and slammed her hands on the nearest table. “Do you know what it’s like to have your parents, peers, and school administrators treat you like a lunatic? It’s HURTFUL! Do you know what it’s like to be the laughingstock of conspiracy blogs and chat rooms? It’s also HURTFUL! Do you know what it’s like to get blocked on social media *personally* by the mayor, the governor, state representatives, and the Pentagon? It’s *really* HURTFUL! Despite our overwhelming catalog of evidence, our valid suspicions and valiant quest for the truth have left us humiliated, stigmatized, and institutionalized at every turn—but *still* the Book Huggers persist! Now, if you ever want your feet to touch the ground, you’re going to give us the information we desire and deserve! You’ve kept the truth from us for four years, *Conner Bailey*, but your web of deception ends today!”

Despite their uncomfortable restraints, everyone in the Rose Main Reading Room froze and stared at the Book Huggers in silence. Even Hero was taken aback by the teenagers’ emotional display.

“Okay, *fine*,” Conner said. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know as long as you help me down afterward.”

The Book Huggers were so anxious to finally get answers, they practically vibrated. They shined a reading lamp directly in Conner’s face and their interrogation began.

“I’m going to ask you a series of questions and I want you to respond with either a yes or a no,” Mindy instructed as she paced below him.

“Wouldn’t it be faster if I just told you every- thing—”

“I’ll ask the questions!” Mindy roared. “In the sixth grade, you and your sister missed school for two weeks. According to a note we found in the nurse’s office, which a source confirmed was written in your mother’s handwriting, you and Alex were both absent due to *chicken pox*. But you weren’t really sick with chicken pox, were you?”

“No,” Conner said with a sigh.

“Precisely what I predicted,” Cindy said.

“In the seventh grade, your sister allegedly moved to Vermont to attend a school for advanced learners,” Mindy said. “Shortly before her departure, we witnessed Alex talking to a book in the school library and whispering covert messages like *‘Take me back’* and *‘I don’t want to be here anymore.’* The transferral paperwork we obtained indicated she was going to live with

her grandmother, but after a thorough scan through public documents, we discovered your grandmother didn't own any property in Vermont. So, Alex never moved to Vermont, did she?"

"No," Conner replied with a massive eye roll.

"I knew that was a lie!" Lindy said with a fist pump.

"In the eighth grade, you and Bree abandoned our school trip on the way home from Germany," Mindy said. "Bree has claimed several different motives for committing the stunt, ranging from underground concerts to food festivals. But you didn't run off for music or cuisine, did you?"

"No," Conner said.

Wendy used the handsaw like a guitar, indicating she had known all along.

"The following year you never returned to school," Mindy said. "Mrs. Peters informed us that you had transferred to Vermont to live with your grandmother and sister, but we all know you didn't move to Vermont, either, right?"

"No," Conner said, and began to lose his patience. "Will you please get to the point? You're wasting time!"

"One more question," Mindy said. "Recently, the girls and I were innocently walking by your house on Sycamore Drive when we saw a group of strange people in the window. We were afraid your house was being robbed, so we took a closer look—*and that's when we saw pirates and a massive ship appear out of a beam of light connected to your binder!* We were told they were just actors and set pieces, but they weren't actors and set pieces, *were they*?"

"No!" Conner snapped. "You guys were *spying* on my house? That's illegal!"

"This leads us to believe that everything from your strange school absences, to your phony transfers, to your European excursion, and even the evacuation happening right now in New York City, are all related!" Mindy declared. "Admit it! You and your sister have been involved in an interdimensional conspiracy for years, and the Book Huggers have been right to question you every step of the way!"

"YES!" Conner shouted. "YOU'VE BEEN RIGHT ABOUT EVERYTHING! FOR THE LAST FOUR YEARS MY SISTER AND I HAVE BEEN TRAVELING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN THE

FAIRY-TALE WORLD, THE WORLDS OF CLASSIC LITERATURE, AND THE WORLDS OF MY CREATIVE WRITING! THAT IS THE TRUTH—ARE YOU PSYCHOPATHS HAPPY NOW?"

Judging by the sheer bliss surfacing in their faces, the Book Huggers were more than happy. They jumped for joy, glad tears filled their eyes, and Wendy climbed down to join the girls in a massive group hug. After years of mistreatment, disrespect, and false diagnoses, the Book Huggers' entire existence had finally been validated.

When their embrace was over, Lindy removed a folded piece of paper from her pocket and read a chart printed on it.

"All right, time to see who won the Bailey Twins Disappearance Pool," she said.

"What is the Bailey Twins Disappearance Pool?" Conner asked.

"We made bets in the sixth grade about where you and Alex were sneaking off to," Mindy explained.

"I guessed alien abduction, tunnel to China, and wizards," Lindy read from the chart. "Mindy had Illuminati, Bigfoot's cave, and vampires. Cindy predicted an international kidnapping ring, lost continent of Lemuria, and the mines of mole people. Wendy had government espionage facility, Swedish cover band, and—well, what do you know—*worlds of fiction!* Wendy wins!"

Mindy, Lindy, and Cindy each handed Wendy twenty bucks.

"I was really hoping for the lost continent of Lemuria, but I'm not mad at worlds of fiction," Cindy said.

"How do you get to the worlds of fiction, anyway?" Lindy asked.

"There's lots of different methods," Conner said. "Like that enormous hole in the back of the room leading to a forest."

Until that moment, the Book Huggers hadn't paid much attention to anything or anyone in the Rose Main Reading Room besides Conner. The four girls turned to the bridge and gasped when they realized just how out of the ordinary it was.

"I thought that was just a big plasma screen!" Lindy said.

"Nope, it's a bridge into another dimension," Conner explained. "And soon, thousands of terrible beings are going to charge out of it and attack our world. So, if you're done asking questions, *cut me down so I can do something to prevent it*!"

Wendy hurried up the bookshelf and sawed off the remaining bars around Conner's body. He took the tool from her and freed Jack, who used his axe to free Bree, Red, and Goldilocks. Once everyone was back on the floor, Conner and Bree went to the bridge between worlds and started brainstorming ways to close it.

"There's got to be a way we can seal this thing before the Literary Army arrives," Conner thought aloud.

"I don't think there's anything we can seal it with that the Literary Army can't get through," Bree said.

Conner angrily kicked the bridge, but his foot just went into the fairy-tale world and he almost slipped.

"I don't know how we're going to stop Morina!" he said. "She's, like, one hundred steps ahead of everyone else!"

"That's not entirely true," Goldilocks said. "Morina revealed a lot about her plot to take over the Otherworld, but she never mentioned anything about our recruits at the hospital. I don't think she knows we have an army of our own!"

"That stupid cow!" Red said. "Morina was probably so fixated on kidnapping Alex she didn't even notice the people from Conner's stories!"

"In that case, our odds haven't really changed," Jack said. "We knew we'd have to face the witches and the Literary Army, we just didn't realize we'd be facing them in the Otherworld. I say we send for the others at the hospital and try to track down your sister in the meantime."

Conner nodded. "Mindy, Cindy, Lindy, and Wendy," he said. "I need you to go back to the abandoned subway and get as far away from here as possible. Once you're someplace safe, find a phone and call my mom. Tell her we need backup and we need it fast. She'll know what to do."

To Conner's complete surprise, the Book Huggers saluted him and left the reading room at once—cooperating with him for the first time in history. Conner, Bree, Red, Jack, and Goldilocks followed them out of the room and down the staircase. As the Book Huggers descended toward the library's lower level, Conner and his friends headed to the entrance hall on the first floor.

As soon as they stepped into the hall, their stomachs dropped at the sight of all the destruction. The doors had been blown open, the front steps were covered in bullets, and the streets were filled with sharp icicles, but luckily,

there were no bodies to be found—living or dead. The witches were gone, but not a single Marine was near the library, either. Conner and his friends stepped into the middle of Fifth Avenue and looked up and down the street for a sign of where the battle had moved.

"Look!" Red said. "All the soldiers are up the road by those trees!"

"It looks like they're trying to get inside Central Park!" Bree said. "But what's that weird bubble in their way?"

Conner recognized his sister's magic instantly. "It's a force field," he said. "The witches must be inside the park, and Alex has put a shield around it."

"Good thing the park is closed at night," Bree said. "Otherwise the witches would have hundreds of hostages."

Central Park's strict curfew was a minor relief, but once Conner remembered *why* he knew the park's hours so well, he was consumed by a horrifying feeling in the pit of his stomach.

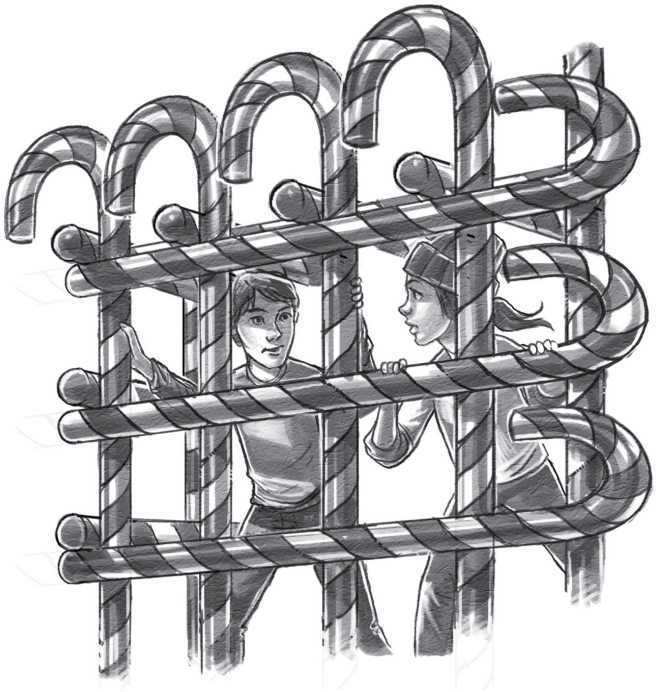
"The park's *not* empty!" he said. "The Boy and Girl Scouts of America are having a huge camp-out in the park *tonight*! The little boy I sat next to on the plane told me all about it!"

"You mean there are *children* trapped inside the park with *witches*?" Red asked.

"Yes! And we have to help them!" Conner said.

"How are we going to get into the park if Alex has put a force field around it?" Jack said.

"If we can't get through it, maybe we can go under it," Conner said. "Rusty said the Calvin Coolidge Express was going to stop in Central Park—let's go back to the tunnel and pray we find another hatch beneath it. But we have to hurry—God only knows what the witches could be doing to those kids right now!"



Chapter Thirteen

SOMETHING'S COOKING

Conner and his friends returned to the Calvin Coolidge Express tunnel beneath the New York Public Library. Jack found an old lantern on the unfinished platform, along with some matches, and lit it so they could see where they were going. Bree used a compass app on her phone to be certain which direction was north. The gang ran up the abandoned subway tunnel as fast as they could toward Central Park, hoping and praying they would find a way into it.

Strangely, only when Goldilocks started running did Hero finally settle down and go to sleep. The more tense and bumpy the situation, the more relaxed the infant became. His aunt Red, however, was fussing enough for both of them. The farther they ran through the tunnel, the more tears ran down her face.

"Red, why are you crying?" Bree asked.

"Physical exertion," Red confessed. "It never agrees with me."

After over a mile and a half of spotting nothing in the tunnel but bricks and the occasional rat, Conner and his friends finally arrived at another unfinished platform. The words CENTRAL PARK were written in chalk on the wall beside it.

"We're here!" Conner said. "Does anyone see a hatch to crawl through?"

Jack raised the lantern toward the ceiling and they saw a circular door that opened inward. Conner found a ladder to the side of the platform and positioned it directly below the door. He climbed the ladder and pulled on the door's handle, but it wouldn't open.

“The door’s bolted shut!” he said. “We’re gonna need a jackhammer or something powerful to get through this.”

Bree, Jack, Goldilocks, and Red looked around the platform but didn’t find anything except some rope and masking tape. Their chances of getting through the door seemed very slim. Red, defeated, took a seat on the edge of the platform and pouted.

“So, we just ran a mile down a filthy, smelly tunnel for *nothing*?” she said, and sprayed her Febreze in the air around her. “This rescue mission isn’t going very well, is it?”

The others walked around the platform as they tried to think of alternative ways into the park. Bree, however, stood very still, and her eyes never moved from Red. An idea blossomed in her mind and a smirk grew across her face.

“Red, can I borrow your Febreze?” she asked.

Before Red had the chance to answer, Bree snatched the can of air freshener out of the queen’s hands. She picked up a roll of masking tape, plucked a long strand of twine from the rope, and climbed the ladder. Bree then taped the can of Febreze to the circular door, near the bolts keeping it shut. She broke off the tip of the canister and stuck the twine down the tube.

“Does anyone have a lighter?” she asked.

Jack handed her the matches he’d found on the previous platform. Bree lit a match and set the loose end of the twine on fire. Conner climbed halfway up the ladder to take a closer look at whatever contraption she was making.

“Bree, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Making a bomb,” Bree said casually. “We might want to take cover—*quickly!*”

Jack, Goldilocks, and Red jumped off the platform and ducked into the tunnel. Bree and Conner hurried down the ladder and joined the others. The flame flickered up the twine and into the can of Febreze and *BAM!* The canister exploded and the circular door fell from the ceiling.

“I’ve saved the day!” Red cheered, and applauded herself.

Jack and Goldilocks rolled their eyes and gave Bree a congratulatory pat on the back. Conner just stared at her with his mouth hanging open.

“What?” Bree asked.

“You just built a *bomb*!” Conner said in shock.

“And?”

“I just realized what a horrible influence you are,” he said.

Bree shrugged. “At least it smells better down here.”

The gang returned to the platform and stared up at the fresh hole in the ceiling. The explosion appeared to have blown through a layer of dirt and grass above the door. Conner climbed the ladder and crawled through the hole, and his friends followed close behind him.

Had Conner not known Central Park was above them he would have thought they were entering a forest in the fairy-tale world. He emerged from the tunnel at the bottom of a grassy hill sprinkled with large boulders. New York City’s skyscrapers were barely visible behind all the trees surrounding the area. Conner looked up and saw Alex’s magic shield stretching across the night sky like a jiggling, sparkling dome.

For whatever reason, Conner’s friends were taking their time climbing up from the tunnel. It took Bree, Jack, and Goldilocks a couple of minutes each to surface into the park, and almost five minutes passed before Red joined them aboveground. Conner thought this was a little peculiar, given the urgency of the situation.

“About time, *Red*,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” Red asked. “I was right behind you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Let’s search the park and find where the witches went. They could be *anywhere* or disguised as *anything*, so everyone keep a sharp eye out. Speak up if you see something even remotely suspicious.”

His friends nodded, and they formed a tight circle, just as they had when searching the library. They found a cement path beside the grassy hill and cautiously followed it deeper into the park. Central Park was enormous, and each time they passed a new directory they were shocked by how little ground they had covered since the previous one. Every now and then they would step through a clearing and see the city’s skyline peeking above the trees, but other than the twinkling buildings, they found nothing out of the ordinary. There wasn’t a witch or a Scout in sight.

Conner found a discarded map on the ground and used it to navigate the labyrinth of pathways snaking through the park. They agreed that the witches had most likely retreated to the heart of the park after battling the Marines, so Conner guided his friends down a trail leading to the park’s

center. The closer they got to the park's core, the more densely the air filled with smoke and a rich aroma.

"Does anyone else smell that?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Goldilocks said. "It smells like gingerbread—*fresh* gingerbread."

"The witches are probably building gingerbread houses to lure the Boy and Girl Scouts of America," Bree said.

"If so, that is *such* a witch cliché," Red said.

"Not all witches are cannibals, though," Conner said. "Whatever they're cooking, I don't think it's *houses*."

The group eventually came to a large fountain on the edge of a small lake. The fountain had a wide, circular pool of shallow water and an angel statue perched at the top. It faced an impressive terrace that was flanked by two enormous staircases. Underneath the terrace was a spacious walkway that was lined with arches and pillars. The area looked like a piece of Rome.

"What's this place?" Jack asked.

"The Bethesda Fountain and Terrace," Conner read from the map.

"It's pretty iconic," Bree added. "They use it in a lot of movies and television shows."

"New York is such a strange place," Red said. "One minute I'm completely repulsed, then the next I feel right at home. Did the *Old* York inspire such mood swings?"

Before Conner could answer her, he was distracted by something moving underneath the Bethesda Terrace. A thin woman wearing a headband, a bright pink tank top, and matching sneakers was peeking out from behind one of the pillars in the walkway. The woman nervously eyed the park around them and frantically gestured for Conner and his friends to join her.

"Pssst," she whispered. *"Come over here—quick!"*

From the way she was dressed, Conner assumed the woman was a native of the Otherworld. Still, he and his friends approached the walkway with the utmost caution. The woman in pink led them into the walkway, and they discovered she wasn't alone. A man in a headband, a green tank top, and matching tennis shoes was hiding behind another pillar. Another man wearing a blue helmet and black biker shorts was ducking behind a trash can. A third man, in a janitor's uniform, was crouched in the corner and

staring into space with his hands over his head.

"It isn't safe to be wandering around the park in the open like that," the woman in pink told them. "If they find you, they'll capture you and take you back to their base."

"You must be talking about the witches," Conner said. "Do you know which part of the park their base is in?"

"They're gathered somewhere between the lake and the reservoir. On the Great Lawn, I suspect," the man in green said. "But they search the park every couple of hours to look for escapees."

"What are you guys doing in the park so late?" Bree asked.

"My husband and I were out for a late jog," the woman in pink explained. "We used the Seventy-Ninth Street Transverse as a shortcut to get home, and that's when *the shield went up*. We tried to get through it, but it zapped us."

She and her husband showed Conner and his friends the burn marks covering their arms.

"We searched the park for help and saw the witches wandering through it," the man in green said. "So we hid in Belvedere Castle, and that's where we met *him*."

He nodded to the janitor in the corner.

"I was working a night shift at the castle," the janitor said. "We tried calling the police but couldn't get a signal or a dial tone on any of the phones. When the coast was clear, the three of us made a quick dash to Tavern on the Green."

"And that's where they met me," the biker said. "My friends and I were cycling around the perimeter of the park and also took a shortcut to get home. After the shield went up, we hid from the witches in Tavern on the Green with other people who got trapped in the park. We thought we were safe there, but eventually they found us. We're the only four who escaped!"

"The rest were captured and taken to the witches' base," the woman in pink said. "We've been hiding under the terrace ever since."

The janitor began to laugh, but not because he was amused. He started rocking back and forth as if he was on the verge of losing his sanity.

"You know, the guy I replaced was fired for making wild claims about magical things in the park," he said. "We all thought old Rusty was just insane, and now here I am, cowering like a toddler from a bunch of *witches*.

Funny how the tables have turned."

The people under the terrace looked exhausted, and they trembled as they spoke. Obviously they had been through quite an ordeal, but something about their story wasn't adding up.

"You guys make it seem like you've been here for days," Conner said. "The witches have only been in the park for an hour at most. How have you covered so much ground?"

The joggers, the biker, and the janitor all exchanged bewildered looks.

"Sweetie, we *have* been here for days," the woman in pink said.

"What?" Conner said. "How is that possible?"

"Ever since the shield went up, time in Central Park started moving much slower than in the rest of the city," the man in green said. "All the clocks on Fifth Avenue have barely moved, and it's been two days since any of us saw the sun!"

"An hour inside the park is like a second outside it," his wife said. "Whenever we see people on the other side of the shield, they're barely moving—like they're stuck in slow motion!"

Conner felt like his heart had stopped beating. Now he understood why it had taken his friends so long to crawl out of the tunnel—Alex wasn't only shielding the park, she was altering its time, too! Whatever the witches were up to, they had bought themselves plenty of time to get it done.

"Wait, why are you so surprised to hear this?" the biker asked. "Haven't you been in the park for just as long?"

"No, we just got here," Conner said.

"You mean there's a way *out* of the park?" the janitor said, and jumped to his feet. *"You've got to take us there! I'm going to lose my mind if I have to stay here another—"*

"Quiet!" Goldilocks whispered. "Someone's approaching!"

Conner, his friends, and the escapees quickly hid behind the pillars in the walkway. They heard footsteps, and soon four figures appeared in the distance. Rat Mary and Serpentina were escorting a Boy Scout and a Girl Scout to the Bethesda Fountain. The witches pushed, kicked, and called the Scouts foul names as they went. The children looked terrified and even more exhausted than the escapees under the terrace. They each carried two large wooden buckets and placed them in the fountain's pool.

"Now fill them up, you filthy hobgoblins!" Rat Mary ordered. "And

hurry! The Mistresses are waiting for their refreshments!"

The Scouts followed her commands and filled their buckets with water from the fountain. Serpentina scanned the water with a peculiar expression.

"Thisss doesn't look any better than the water in lakesss or pondsss," she hissed. "The Mistressesss requested *clean* water."

"What the Mistresses don't know won't hurt them," Rat Mary said. "Besides, the Snow Queen and the Sea Witch promised us that life in the Otherworld would be different. So far, it doesn't seem to be any different from back home. We're *still* doing all the work while they sit on their thrones and do nothing."

"You know, Morina may have intentionally led usss all to our deathsss, but I'm starting to ressspect her," Serpentina said. "Ssshe's probably back in the kingdomsss enjoying being the only—"

Even though no one made a sound under the terrace, both witches suddenly snapped their heads toward it. Conner, his friends, and the escapees all held their breath and tucked themselves as far as possible behind the pillars.

"I thought I heard something," Serpentina said.

"Probably more humans—*yuck*," Rat Mary said. "I look forward to exterminating them all. They're the true vermin of this world."

"Ssshould we round them up and take them back to the bassse?" Serpentina asked.

"No, we've done our task," Rat Mary said. "We'll send another witch to come back for them."

The Scouts finished filling their buckets, which became so heavy that the children could barely carry them. The witches shoved the Scouts back in the direction they'd come from and disappeared into the park. The escapees under the terrace waited a couple of minutes before moving, just to make sure the witches were gone.

"That was a close one," the woman in pink said. "Let's get out of here before other witches come back to capture us."

The group of escapees hurried through the walkway and away from the terrace. They climbed a flight of stairs leading to a path on higher ground and heard a loud *POP* from above them. They looked up in terror to see Rat Mary glaring at them from the top of the stairs. The witch roared with laughter and exposed her tiny, sharp teeth.

“You didn’t actually think we’d leave you here, did you?” she said.

The escapees turned around and ran back toward the terrace, but after another loud *POP*, Serpentina appeared and blocked their way.

“You aren’t going anywhere!” she roared. “Sssay, I recognize sssome of you from our home world! You’re the friends and brother of the Bailey girl! Oh my, the Mistressesss will be ssso pleasssed we captured you!”

“We aren’t coming quietly!” Jack shouted.

He raised his axe and Goldilocks raised her sword, but Rat Mary and Serpentina snapped their fingers and the weapons flew into the witches’ hands. The BabyBjörn, with Hero inside, also unfastened itself from around Goldilocks, flew to Rat Mary, and wrapped around her torso. The witch looked down at the strange holster and was pleasantly surprised to find an infant attached to it.

“It’s my lucky day,” Rat Mary said. “There are so many potions I’ve always wanted to make that require an infant as the main ingredient.”

“NOOOO!” Goldilocks yelled.

She charged up the stairs to rescue her son, but Serpentina’s long tongue wrapped around Goldilocks’s leg and dragged her back down the steps.

“If you even think about hurting him, I’ll teach you a new definition of pain!” Goldilocks warned the witches.

Rat Mary and Serpentina shared a menacing laugh.

“I sincerely doubt you’ll get the chance,” Rat Mary said. “Not where you’re going, at least.”

With no way to escape and no one to save them, Conner, his friends, and the Central Park escapees were taken prisoner. The captives followed the Boy and Girl Scout through the park while the witches watched them from the rear. The witches forced them to walk in a straight line, and whenever someone stepped out of line, they were either whipped by Serpentina’s tongue or scratched by Rat Mary’s long nails.

They journeyed deeper and deeper into the park, traveling more than half a mile. Soon the smell of gingerbread became so strong and the air

became so smoky that it was difficult to breathe. Conner and the other captives stepped onto the Great Lawn in the heart of Central Park and instantly knew they had arrived at the witches' base.

What was usually fifty-five acres of open grassy fields and baseball diamonds was now the location of one nightmarish scene after another.

Hundreds of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts were scattered across the Great Lawn and were being forced to bake some sort of gingerbread creation. There were rows of huge cauldrons where Scouts mixed ingredients and stirred dough. The dough was scooped out of the cauldrons by other Scouts and spread out on metal sheets as big as king-size mattresses. Once the dough was flat, Scouts cut it with enormous cookie cutters, making human-size gingerbread men. Then the Scouts transferred the metal sheets to one of a dozen enormous brick ovens along the west side of the lawn.

Charcoaline kept the ovens blazing with her fiery breath. Arboris, Tarantulene, and all the other witches walked among the Scouts like prison guards. They smacked and scolded every child who wasn't working to their level of satisfaction—which was *all* of them. Just like the Boy and Girl Scout collecting water at the Bethesda Fountain, all the children on the Great Lawn were terrified and exhausted and moved about like zombies. Conner saw Oliver, his companion from the plane, stationed at one of the cauldrons. Oliver was too afraid to look up and kept his eyes on the dough he was mixing.

"Why are they baking such enormous gingerbread men?" Red asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Goldilocks said. "They're making gingerbread soldiers—the witches are cooking up an army!"

"If we get out of this alive, I never want to hear the word *army* again," Conner said.

At the north end of the Great Lawn, the witches had constructed a tall hill made of jagged bedrock. It loomed over the lawn like a rocky watchtower. The bottom of the hill was guarded by the lion statues from the library, the polar bears from the Snow Queen's sleigh, and a thin moat where the Sea Witch's sharks swam. At the top of the bedrock, the Snow Queen sat on a throne made of ice, and the Sea Witch was perched on a throne made of coral.

Alex stood between the Snow Queen and the Sea Witch at the peak of the hill. Her eyes were still glowing like lightning, her hair was still floating

above her head like a slow-motion fire, and she faced the roof of her massive force field. She seemed less like a person and more like a *generator* stuck in a mindless state, producing magic that protected and benefited her commanders. His sister's lifelessness brought tears to Conner's eyes, and he wondered if she could even be saved, or if, like Morina had said, she was cursed past the point of no return.

Rat Mary and Serpentina directed their prisoners toward the northeast corner of the Great Lawn to a row of cages made from candy canes. The cages were filled with Scout leaders, Central Park staff, tourists, and other New Yorkers the witches had rounded up. The witches pushed the joggers, the biker, the janitor, Jack, Goldilocks, Red, and Bree inside a small cage—but right before they could grab hold of Conner, he dashed toward the hill to get to his sister.

Just the way he'd felt at the barricade on Fifth Avenue, Conner was consumed by a powerful desire to save his sister and lost all common sense. Rat Mary and Serpentina chased after him, but Conner was much faster than the witches. He ran in an erratic pattern between the cauldrons and barely missed being lassoed by Serpentina's tongue. Conner leaped over the moat at the base of the hill and hiked up the bedrock as fast as he could.

"Alex!" he shouted. "It's me—it's your brother! The witches have invaded the Otherworld! You've got to fight off the curse or else—"

Before Conner could get anywhere close to his sister, one of the library lions knocked him off the hill. He soared over the moat and landed painfully hard on the ground. The wind was knocked out of him, and he gasped for air.

"CONNER!" Alex screamed.

For just a brief moment, her concern for her brother overpowered the curse. Her eyes stopped glowing, her hair stopped floating, and the shield around Central Park disappeared. The Snow Queen and the Sea Witch looked at each other in panic—they hadn't thought *anything* could break the curse.

"Keep the shield up, you stupid girl!" the Snow Queen screeched.

Alex immediately returned to her bewitched state, and the shield reappeared over Central Park. Rat Mary and Serpentina dragged Conner to the cage and threw him inside it with his friends.

"Conner, are you hurt?" Goldilocks asked him.

“I’ll be okay,” he groaned.

“That was so stupid of you!” Bree berated him. “What were you thinking? You could have gotten yourself killed!”

“I knew exactly what I was doing,” Conner said. “Now we know Morina was wrong—Alex *hasn’t* been cursed past the point of no return! She’s still in there—*we can still save her!*”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE CURSED AND THE COURTEOUS

A powerful rainstorm traveled down the western coast of the fairy-tale world and drenched the Dwarf Forests. Luckily, most of the residents and animals were already in hiding from the Literary Army, so the woods were virtually empty when the storm hit. But there was still one creature that got caught in the rain and scuttled through the forest in search of shelter.

The creature was shivering, soaked to the bone, and a complete stranger to the woods. After traveling in circles all night, it spotted a cottage by the side of a stream. The cottage appeared to be empty, as there was no light shining through the windows or smoke rising from the chimney. The creature hoped the cottage's looks weren't deceiving—not for the creature's own sake, but for the sake of any poor soul who might be inside. The creature had a reputation for leaving an impression on whomever it crossed paths with.

The creature broke down the front door and stepped out of the storm. The cottage was unlike any place it had ever seen. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, and the furniture were all painted white. The front room was lined with shelves of tiny glass bottles filled with colorful liquids.

The creature was parched from its trek through the vicious storm. It took a bottle from a shelf, twisted off the small golden cap, and smelled the red liquid inside. The fluid smelled like a fruity juice, so the creature threw its head back and downed the bottle in one gulp. Not only did the liquid

instantly quench the creature's thirst, but it also reenergized the creature and made it feel warm inside. The creature inspected the bottle and saw that the word REJUVENATION was engraved on the glass. It checked the other bottles on the shelves and discovered similar engravings. The blue liquids were labeled YOUTH, the pink liquids were labeled BEAUTY, the purple bottles were labeled VIBRANCY, and the turquoise bottles were labeled STAMINA.

The strange engravings aroused the creature's curiosity. It searched the cottage for more clues about what kind of establishment it had stumbled into.

In the back of the room the creature found a wall covered by a curtain. It pulled a tassel and the curtain separated, revealing a large mirror with a golden frame. As soon as the creature realized it was a mirror, it quickly shielded its eyes to avoid its reflection. Looking into the creature's eyes instantly turned any observer into *stone*—and the creature itself was no exception.

If someone managed to get a glimpse of it before being turned into stone, they would see she was a woman with glowing red eyes, fangs, and a long, scaly body. Instead of hair, the woman had a head full of hissing snakes that constantly fought one another for dominance. The monster's name was Medusa, and she was from a world far beyond the realm of fairy tales.

Strangely, as Medusa shielded herself from her reflection, she noticed that something was very different about her appearance. The powerful glow that was usually emitted by her eye sockets had disappeared. She peeked through her fingers at the mirror, and her gaze drifted up her body and landed on her face—but miraculously, Medusa wasn't turned to stone. Instead of the bright red pupils that infamously turned people into statues, Medusa saw a pair of brown eyes she hadn't seen in a very long time. She glanced down at the empty bottle in her hand and realized that the liquid inside wasn't juice, but a *potion*.

As Medusa gazed into her new eyes, her reflection started to transform, too. She watched in amazement as the hideous creature in the mirror slowly turned into a beautiful woman. Her head of snakes became a head of thick, sandy hair, her scaly skin became smooth and tanned, and her long coiled body became a voluptuous figure under a crimson toga. The Mirror of Truth

had only changed Medusa's reflection, but for the first time in decades, Medusa saw the woman she was *before* she was turned into a monster.

Medusa wondered what other kinds of sorcery the cottage might contain. A door caught her eye on the other side of the room, and she went to it. Although it had several locks and bolts, the door was wide open and led to a steep staircase descending into a basement. Medusa slithered down the steps and discovered the twenty sleeping children under Morina's dark spell.

"Hello!" said a polite voice behind her.

Medusa looked over her shoulder and found another mirror leaning against the basement wall. A cheerful frog man wearing a three-piece suit waved at her from inside it. For a brief second, Medusa instinctively covered her eyes to spare the frog man from being turned into stone, forgetting that the potion had transformed her eyes. It had been so long since Medusa had communicated with another living thing, she'd almost forgotten how.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine," the frog man said.

"What in Zeus's name is that supposed to mean?"

"Unfortunately, I've lost my memory," he explained. "I've been searching for someone who might recognize me and help me remember, but so far you're the only person I've found."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but we've never met," Medusa said. "Believe me—I would know if we'd crossed paths."

"Well, that's a shame," the frog man said. "I guess I'll have to keep searching. I've looked practically everywhere, but everything is empty. It makes me wonder if there's a sale happening somewhere."

"How did you get inside the mirror?" Medusa asked.

"Oh, I was cursed," he explained. "I can't remember who or what put me in here, nor when or how it happened, but I do know I was *very* upset about it."

"Was this cottage your home?" she asked.

"Hmmm," the frog man said as he looked around the basement. "It seems very familiar, but I don't think it was *my* home, per se. I know very little about myself, but I can't imagine I was the type who kept unconscious children in the basement."

Medusa took a second look at the mysterious children. For the first time, she noticed that their skin had a light glow, and even though they were all the size of children, many had the wrinkles and crow's-feet of people much older.

"What happened to them?" she asked.

"Looks like they're under some sort of spell," he said.

"I suppose that makes *all* of us kindred spirits."

"You mean, you're cursed, too?" the frog man asked.

Medusa shot him a look—*wasn't it obvious?*

"Well, it would be rude to just *assume*," the frog man said. "Who cursed you, then? Was it the same person who cursed me or the children?"

"That's very unlikely," Medusa answered. "I was damned by a jealous goddess in my home world. She turned my hair into snakes, covered my body in scales, and cursed my eyes to turn anyone they saw into stone. I was so ashamed of myself and terrified of harming people that I secluded myself on an island called Sarpedon. I lived on the island for years until I was captured and brought to this world."

"Who captured you?"

"A terrible army of pirates, winged monkeys, and card soldiers," she said. "They kept me blindfolded in a cage and used me to turn their enemies into stone. Eventually I escaped and have been searching the woods for a place to isolate myself ever since. The longer I roam, the more lives I ruin."

"If your eyes turn others into stone, how am I not a statue?" the frog man asked.

"I drank a potion upstairs that returned my eyes to normal," Medusa explained. "I'm not sure how long the potion will last, but there are hundreds more where it came from. They're engraved with words like *youth*, *beauty*, and *stamina*—all the things I'm lacking."

"That's wonderful!" the frog man said. "Suppose you drank *all* the potions—do you think it would turn you back into your human form?"

Medusa hadn't thought about it, but the idea mesmerized her.

"It's certainly worth a try," she said.

A mutual smile stretched across their faces, but the frog man's smile faded when a troubling thought crossed his mind.

"Say, where do you think all that youth, beauty, and stamina came from?" he asked.

Medusa was so pleased with the results, she hadn't stopped to wonder how the potions were made. Her eyes wandered back to the sleeping children, and it dawned on her just how drained of youth, beauty, and stamina they appeared to be. It suddenly became clear where the potions were coming from, and Medusa felt sick to her stomach.

"Hera Almighty," she gasped. "It's coming from the *children*! Their life force is being drained into potion bottles!"

The mythical monster was overwhelmed with guilt. She knelt on the floor and began to weep. With no handkerchief to dry her eyes, Medusa used the empty bottle of *rejuvenation* to collect her tears. She cried so hard, it wasn't long before the bottle was overflowing.

"There, there," the frog man comforted her. "It was just an accident. You wouldn't have drunk the potion if you'd known what it was."

"But I *would*!" Medusa confessed. "For the first time in decades, I've found a way to break the curse! I've found a cure for this miserable existence! There's *nothing* I wouldn't do to get rid of the monster I've become! I just wish it didn't have to come at such a terrible price!"

Medusa's admitted selfishness made her cry even harder than she had before. For reasons unknown to him, the frog man sympathized with her dark confession. He went silent for a few moments and gathered the right words to advise her with.

"If you ask me, there are two options at hand. Both will change you, but only *one* will get rid of the monster forever."

"What's the first option?" she asked.

"You can drink all the potions upstairs and return to the woman you were before the curse. You'll never turn another soul into stone and never see a monster in the mirror again. But if you steal from these children, you won't *look* like a monster anymore—you'll just *be* one. And that's much worse, in my opinion."

"And the second option?"

"You can restore all the bottled youth, beauty, and stamina to their rightful owners," the frog man explained. "It won't change how you look, but it *will* change how you look at yourself. From then on, every time you pass a mirror and see your reflection, you won't see a hideous monster; you'll see a woman who chose to help others instead of helping herself. And anyone who looks into a mirror and sees *who* they are, over *what* they

are—well, it's impossible to curse someone like that."

Medusa thought about the frog man's words and knew he was right. She wiped her tears, lifted herself from the floor, and slithered up the stairs. A few moments later she returned with as many potion bottles as she could carry. She made several trips up and down the stairs until every bottle was in the basement. One by one, she twisted off each golden cap and poured the potions into the mouths of the sleeping children.

Little by little, the stolen youth, beauty, and stamina returned to their rightful owners. The children's skin stopped glowing; they opened their heavy eyes and looked around the basement in a daze. They were too groggy to get up or keep their eyes open for long, but each child felt Morina's curse disappear from their body. One of the little boys stayed conscious long enough to look up at Medusa. She cowered in the corner of the basement, afraid her appearance would frighten the child. The boy wasn't scared at all; on the contrary, he smiled at her.

"You must be an angel," he whispered. "Thank you for saving us."

Just like all the other children, the boy closed his eyes and began to sleep off the lingering effects of the curse. Medusa had been called many things since being cursed, but this was the first time someone called her an *angel*.

"The children must be delirious if they think I'm an angel," she said.

"I'd say it's quite fitting, actually," the frog man said. "It takes a very special person to commit such a selfless act."

Although she was too modest to agree, Medusa nodded.

"You were right," she said. "From now on, every time I pass a mirror, I won't see my hideous reflection, I'll only be reminded of helping these children."

Suddenly, the mirror began to glow as brightly as the sun. Beams of light wrapped around the frog man's body and pushed him through the plate of glass as if it were made of water. The frog man collapsed on the basement floor and the mirror returned to normal.

"I'm… I'm… *I'm free!*" he cheered. "The curse is broken!"

As soon as he got to his feet, the frog man's memories returned like a river bursting through a broken dam.

"I can *remember*!" he announced. "I remember where I was born, I remember where I grew up, I remember all the places I lived, I remember

the faces of my loved ones—*and I remember my name!*"

"What is it?" Medusa asked.

"Charles Carlton Charming, but my friends call me Froggy."

The restored frog man paused as a very critical memory surfaced.

"Oh my word—*Alex and Conner!* I was trying to warn them about the Literary Army when my memory faded! I was searching for a place where they might be hiding! I need to find them and the royal families before it's too late!"

"Did you say *royal families*?" Medusa asked. "Because I could have sworn I saw a bunch of royal families in an abandoned mine not far from here. They were hiding with loads of other people, but they all turned into stone before I could get a good look at them."

Froggy's heart practically fell into his stomach at the thought of his friends and family being turned into statues.

"Is there a way to transform someone back after they've been turned to stone?" he asked with large, desperate eyes.

"Actually, there might be," Medusa said. "After the goddess transformed me into a monster, she said *only tears of the damned can soothe the eyes of the cursed*. I thought it was just vindictive banter, but perhaps it was *instructions*. Take the bottle of my tears, pour them into the eyes of the statues, and it may reverse the damage."

She handed him the *rejuvenation* bottle filled with her teardrops.

"Thank you!" Froggy said. "How do I get to the abandoned mine from here?"

"I'll take you there, but first, I need a favor from you," she said.

"Yes, of course! Anything!"

"Eventually the rejuvenation potion will wear off and my old eyes will return," Medusa said. "I need someplace to go where I won't harm others—a place I can live where no one will ever find me."

"I know just the place," Froggy said. "I used to live in a hole up the river from here. It's not much, but it's very cozy. There are hundreds of books there and a nice chair beside a fireplace where you can sit and keep warm. As a matter of fact, most of the books in my collection were on the subject of *curses*—there may be a remedy for yours within their pages! If you take me to the abandoned mine, I'll tell you exactly how to find it."

Medusa was delighted by the description. "It sounds like a paradise,"

she said. “Now follow me—I’ll show you to the mine.”

NEWS 11 STORM WATCH IN 11 BREAK!

Chapter Fifteen

BACKUP

Conner had only been gone for eighteen hours, but his friends and characters at the Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital had grown twice as restless since he left. It was almost ten o'clock at night and all the pirates, superheroes, Cyborgs, mummies, literary characters, and fairy-tale characters were wide awake. Every passing hour spent in the commissary felt like it was longer than the one before. They were itching for something productive to do and running out of ways to entertain themselves.

After their *I Love Lucy* marathon was finished, the pirates of Starboardia discovered a steamy soap opera on Telemundo. Auburn Sally, Admiral Jacobson, and the entire *Dolly Llama* crew couldn't look away from the Latin American actors' passionate performances. They felt their faces blush at every turn of the scandalous story.

"Does anyone know what they're saying?" Winking Wendy asked.

"I don't understand a word, but I *feel* everything," Somersault Sydney said.

Across the commissary, the characters from "The Adventures of Blimp Boy" passed the time by teaching the characters from the Sherwood Forest how to gamble. It didn't matter how many times Beau Rogers and his great-aunt Emgee repeated the rules, the Merry Men had a hard time soaking up the concept of poker.

"AHA! THE ODDS ARE IN MY FAVOR AGAIN!" Robin Hood boasted. "I HAVE THREE KINGS AND TWO ACES! GOOD LUCK BEATING THAT!"

The archaeologists folded their cards before they even had a chance to look at them.

"Robin, for the tenth time, you're not supposed to reveal your cards until the end," Beau said. "The whole point is to make us *think* you have a good hand—you don't just come out and say it."

The Prince of Thieves let out a haughty laugh. "BUT I *HAVE* FOOLED YOU," he said, and revealed his cards. "BEHOLD, *A PAIR OF TWOS*! NOT ONLY HAVE I DECEIVED YOU, BUT I'VE DONE IT IN RECORD TIME! I DARE SAY THE STUDENT HAS BECOME THE TEACHER. NOW SLIDE OVER MY EARNINGS!"

The superheroes from "The Ziblings" were in the middle of a heated round of charades with the space explorers from "Galaxy Queen." Blaze, Whipney, and Morph were one team, while the Cyborg Queen, Commander Newters, and Professor Wallet were on the other.

"It's an elephant!" Blaze called out.

"That's right!" Morph said, and quickly moved on.

"It's a satellite dish!" Whipney guessed.

"Yes!" Morph said, and went to the next paper.

"It's a toy box!" Blaze said.

"That's it!" Morph said. "Boy, we're really good at this!"

"Of course you're doing well!" the Cyborg Queen complained. "You're *literally transforming* into whatever the paper says! I don't see how this is a fair game!"

Meanwhile, Trollbella got roped into playing a game of hide-and-seek with the Lost Boys from Neverland. The troll queen counted to a hundred while the boys hid, but when she was done counting, instead of searching for them, Trollbella had a seat and flipped through a magazine.

"Aren't you going to find them?" the Tin Woodman asked her.

"I was, but then I had an epiphany," Trollbella said. "If I want boys to stop playing games with me, I've got to stop playing games with boys."

"Even *hide-and-seek*?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"*Especially* hide-and-seek," Trollbella said in total seriousness. "Who we are on the playground is who we are in life, and I'm done being a seeker. If someone wants to be my Troblin King, he's just gonna have to find *me*."

Charlotte stood by the window and watched the characters getting fresh

air outside. Peter Pan and Bolt competed in several rounds of a questionable activity they called *Who Can Fly Closest to the Moon Without Passing Out*. Lester, the Rosary Chicken, and Blubo were picking at bugs in the lawns surrounding the hospital. Bones, the mummified dog from the Pyramid of Anesthesia, buried the parts of his body that fell off. Unbeknownst to him, Clawdius was digging them back up and burying them in other spots.

The Blissworm inched up a tree, hung upside down from a branch, and blew Charlotte a kiss good-bye, and then its soft body slowly hardened into a cocoon—which was very surprising, since Conner had never mentioned anything about it having a metamorphosis. The space worm even placed a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the corner of its chrysalis.

Although there was plenty to distract her, nothing could take Charlotte's mind off her children. Every additional hour she didn't hear from Conner was more torturous than the previous one. The delayed communication made her fear that something was wrong—*very* wrong.

The commissary doors swung open and Bob entered with a mummy who had slipped out without Charlotte noticing.

"Look who I found in the emergency room," Bob said.

The mummy had two large burn marks on the wraps covering his heart.

"What happened to his chest?" Charlotte asked.

"Apparently two paramedics found him roaming the parking lot," Bob said. "They checked his pulse and took him to Emergency right away. The nurses were trying to revive him when I got there. I had to make him sign a DNR to get them to stop."

"He must have walked right past me," Charlotte said. "I've been trying to keep everyone stimulated while we wait to hear from Conner, but there's only so much they can do. You know things are dull when the dead start wandering off."

"Don't be so hard on yourself—you've got a lot on your mind," Bob said. "Speaking of which, any word from Conner?"

"Nothing," she said with a heavy sigh. "I've tried calling a dozen times, but no one is answering. I know I worry about them constantly, but I can't fight a feeling that something terrible has happened. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I feel like they both *need* me."

Bob and Charlotte were distracted when the pirates from Starboardia

started moaning at the television.

"What's going on?" Charlotte asked.

"Some lady came on the screen and interrupted our show!" Fish-Lips Lucy grumbled. "And Maria was *just* about to catch José being unfaithful!"

Bob and Charlotte glanced at the screen to see what they were talking about. President of the United States Katherine Walker was sitting at her desk in the Oval Office, about to give a national address.

"That *lady* is the president," Bob said. "She only comes on TV when something important is happening."

"But it's past midnight on the East Coast," Charlotte said. "What could be so important?"

"Beats me," Bob said. "Turn it up, guys."

The pirates turned up the volume and everyone in the commissary gathered around the television. The characters outside could tell something was going on and came in to see what the big deal was. The Blissworm even peeked out from its cocoon.

"My fellow Americans," President Walker said to the camera. "By now I'm sure you've heard about the situation unfolding in New York City. There are many outlandish reports circulating in the news and social media, so allow me to present the facts and calm the frenzy. Early yesterday morning, a massive gas leak was discovered at the main branch of the New York Public Library. Local authorities were called to the scene and quickly ordered an evacuation of the surrounding area. After carefully assessing the damage throughout the day, that evacuation has now been extended to the entire island of Manhattan. I understand this poses an inconvenience of immeasurable proportions, but nothing, I repeat, *nothing*, is more important than the safety of the American people. We assure you the situation is being taken care of by highly trained professionals and there is no need to panic…."

Charlotte instantly began to panic.

"She wouldn't be reassuring the country if there were nothing to worry about," Charlotte said. "Now I know I wasn't just being paranoid—*something's definitely happened! The twins are in danger!*"

Just then, Charlotte's cell phone started buzzing in her pocket. She retrieved the phone and saw an incoming call from an unfamiliar number. Charlotte immediately answered the phone, praying she'd hear the voices of

her children on the other end.

"Conner, is that you?"

"Mrs. Gordon? Oh, thank God, I've finally got you! I've been trying to get a signal for hours but there's a lot of people using their cell phones around here!"

At first Charlotte didn't recognize the young voice, but she could tell that the caller was standing in a crowded area.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"It's Mindy—Mindy McClowsky," Mindy said.

"And Cindy Strutherbergers!" Cindy added.

"And Lindy Lenkins!" Lindy announced.

Wendy performed a quick clap-snap combo to announce her presence.

"Wendy Takahashi is with us, too," Mindy said. "You're on speaker with the Book Huggers from Willow Crest High School."

Charlotte was automatically annoyed. "Girls, I really don't have time to talk about whether or not Alex and Conner are interning at Area 51—"

"You don't have to!" Mindy said. "We just saw Conner and he told us all about your family secret! Our mission is complete—we're totally in the loop now! And boy, do you guys have enough drama to fill a week of talk shows, or what!"

"Wait a second, did you say you *just saw Conner*?"

"Yes!" Mindy said. "We were just at the library with him and his friends —and by the way, don't believe a word anyone says about a *gas leak*. That is *totally* not what's going on!"

The news overwhelmed Charlotte and she sat down. The pirates turned off the television so they could eavesdrop on her conversation.

"Where is Conner now? Is he or Alex with you?"

"No, he and his friends went to find Alex, but we're not sure where they went," Mindy explained. "Come to think of it, I'm not sure where we are, either. After we crawled out of the abandoned subway tunnel, we got shoved into a bus by police officers and they drove us off the island."

"I think we're in Brooklyn," Lindy said.

"No, this is definitely Queens," Cindy said.

Wendy pointed to a sign that clearly stated they were in Hoboken, but no one paid attention to her.

"It's impossible to tell," Mindy said. "Anyway, this weird bridge-thingy

appeared in the library that leads directly to the fairy-tale world. I guess a bunch of witches came out of it earlier and something way worse is coming soon. It's like a bad episode of *Doctor Who* over here! Conner asked us to call you and say they need backup—he said you'd know what to do!"

Like a firefighter at the sound of an alarm, Charlotte hopped to her feet and began gathering her purse, Conner's binder of short stories, the fairy-tale treasury, and the flask of Portal Potion.

"We'll leave right away!" she said. "Thank you for calling, Mindy!"

"You're welcome!" Mindy said. "Oh! And Mrs. Gordon? One last thing. My fellow Book Huggers and I will absolutely accept your apology for lying to us over the years whenever you feel it's an appropriate—"

Charlotte hung up the phone before Mindy could finish her sentence. She turned back to the others and saw they were gathered right behind her—desperate to know the details of her call.

"Well?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"Conner needs us," Charlotte announced. "I'm not sure how, but the witches have crossed into the Otherworld and the Literary Army isn't far behind. We've got to get to New York and stop them before they destroy the city!"

The commissary erupted in celebration—not at the news of the approaching army, but because they were finally leaving the hospital.

"How are we going to get there?" Bob asked. "I've got some frequent flyer miles left, but not enough for *all* of us."

"We don't have to worry about transportation, silly!" Bolt said. "The Ziblings have a jet!"

"Aunt Emgee and I have a blimp!" Beau Rogers said.

"The Cyborgs have an intergalactic spacecraft," Commander Newters said.

"And *we* have the *Dolly Llama*—the fastest pirate ship in the Caribbean Sea!" Auburn Sally proclaimed.

The characters scratched their heads at the odd idea of taking a pirate ship across the country.

"Sally, New York City is three thousand miles away," Charlotte explained. "You can't get there by boat."

"Oh yes you can!" Peter Pan declared. "We'll make the ship fly with fairy dust. I have just enough left to make it soar! And once we sail the

skies to New York City, *we'll rescue Tinker Bell from the miserable Captain Hook*!"

"We'll defeat the Wicked Witch of the West and free the Winkies and the flying monkeys from her magic spell!" Blubo said.

"We'll dethrone the Queen of Hearts, and perhaps earn a heart of our own!" the Tin Woodman said.

"WE'LL BURN THE UGLY WITCHES AT THE STAKE—BUT KEEP THE ATTRACTIVE ONES!" Robin Hood said.

"We'll save Butterboy from the clutches of the Breemonster!" Trollbella said. "Sorry, I meant from *the bad guys*!"

Charlotte appreciated the characters' spirit, but she knew they were wasting time.

"All right, enough declarations," she said. "*Let's go save the world!* But before we go, someone needs to grab the Blissworm."

Morina was standing in the Dwarf Forests a few yards away from the bridge between worlds. Earlier, she had sent a crow to the Northern Kingdom with a message informing the Literary Emperors that the first phase of their plan was complete. She instructed them to meet her in the woods with their armies at sunrise, and their invasion of the Otherworld would begin.

Strangely, the witch had not received a response confirming that they had gotten the message. Morina grew more impatient the longer she waited to hear back. Finally, a few hours after sending word, she got a reply—but it wasn't the response she was expecting.

The ground began to rumble and the trees started to sway as something enormous moved through the forest. Soon the sound of marching feet echoed through the woods, moving closer and closer to the witch.

Soon the Wicked Witch of the West, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook appeared in the distance with their entire army following behind. Thousands of Winkies and card soldiers stood in two very neat rows behind their emperors; the *Jolly Roger* and its rambunctious crew drifted in the air

above them like a giant balloon; and the sky surrounding the floating pirate ship was filled with swarms of flying monkeys.

The emperors led their army through the woods until they stood face-to-face with the witch.

“Hello, emperors,” Morina said. “What a surprise to see you arrive so soon. I wasn’t expecting you until sunrise. I hope you received the message with my instructions.”

The Wicked Witch, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook exchanged a sly smile.

“Your message was received, but we thought it would be best to respond in person,” the Wicked Witch said.

“Oh?” Morina asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Not at all,” Captain Hook said. “We were very pleased to hear that the witches have successfully crossed into the Otherworld. However, there’s been a change of plans. Instead of waiting for the witches to weaken the Otherworld’s defenses, we’ve decided to enter the Otherworld *now* and take it by surprise.”

Morina was infuriated that they had altered the agenda without consulting her first. She was so enraged, her eyes turned red and her veins visibly blackened. Still, the witch tried to stay as calm as possible, knowing the emperors wouldn’t respond to anger.

“My lords, I understand you’re eager to invade, but I beg you to follow the plan I’ve created,” she said. “If we cross into the Otherworld before the witches are exterminated, you’ll be battling the witches *and* the Otherworld’s armies.”

“I think we can handle a gaggle of witches,” the Wicked Witch cackled.

“Certainly,” Morina said. “But as I first explained, it’ll be much easier to secure domination if we wait for the witches to perish in—”

“NO MORE WAITING!” the Queen of Hearts roared. “We want to conquer the Otherworld and we want to *conquer it NOW*! Step aside or you’ll be the first casualty of the night!”

Morina knew it was useless to reason with them. The emperors were like toddlers waiting to play with a new toy. As much as she wanted to stop them, she wasn’t powerful enough to take on the Literary Army by herself.

She reluctantly stepped out of the way and allowed the Wicked Witch, the Queen of Hearts, Captain Hook, and their army to march toward the

bridge.

The emperors were making a catastrophic mistake by entering the Otherworld early. However, Morina knew her plan wasn't doomed to fail just yet. There was still someone in the equation who *was* powerful enough to take on an army—*several armies*, if they were directed properly.

So the witch remained quiet as a new strategy unfolded: If she could just get to *Alex* before the witches were slain, there was still a chance Morina could succeed….

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE TEARS OF MEDUSA

Froggy hopped around the abandoned dwarf mine and poured Medusa's tears into the eyes of all the statues. He was surprised to see there were just as many stone animals in the mine as there were men, women, and children. The statues were pale, solid as rocks, and frozen with such terrified expressions that Froggy didn't recognize any of the faces. He prayed the teardrops would reverse the magic and the Bailey twins would appear among them.

Once he finished pouring Medusa's teardrops into each pair of stone eyes, Froggy took a step back and waited with bated breath. Like chicks hatching from their eggs, the statues slowly started to wiggle and crack. Arms and legs began moving, heads began turning, and the stone chipped away like it was nothing but a thin shell. The men, women, children, and animals brushed themselves off and cleared dust from the back of their throats.

Froggy was relieved to see so many familiar faces appear around him. He saw his brothers, Chance, Chase, and Chandler; their wives, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White; and his nieces, Hope and Ash. Froggy also recognized Empress Elvina, Queen Rapunzel and Sir William, Hagetta, the Traveling Tradesman, Red's granny, the Little Old Woman from the Shoe Inn, Rook and Farmer Robins, Sir Lampton, Sir Grant, and soldiers from the Charming and Northern Kingdoms. He even saw Cornelius, Porridge, Buckle, and Oats once they uncovered themselves.

The people and animals looked around the abandoned mine in a daze.

The last thing they remembered was the bright eyes of a horrifying monster, and now they were brushing layers of stone off their bodies.

"What happened to us?" Snow White asked.

"You were turned into stone by a creature named Medusa," Froggy explained. "I poured her tears into your eyes and it reversed the spell!"

Everyone's confusion doubled when they realized Froggy was standing beside them.

"Charlie, is that *you*?" Chance asked in disbelief.

"Hello, brother!" Froggy said. "Words can't describe how wonderful it is to see all of you!"

Froggy gave his brothers and their wives enormous hugs and kissed his nieces on the cheek.

"You're out of the mirror!" Cinderella said. "But how did you escape it? Red told us it was impossible to free you!"

"That's what I thought, but I've happily been proved wrong," Froggy said. "Getting here was an awfully big journey, and I promise to tell the story one day, but right now it's urgent I find Alex and Conner."

Froggy looked around for the Bailey twins, but they weren't inside the crowded mine.

"Wait a second, where are the twins?" he asked.

"They aren't here," Chandler said. "They went into the Otherworld."

"And what about Red? And Jack and Goldilocks?" Froggy asked.

"They're with the twins," Chandler said. "Don't worry, they're safe as far as we know."

"I don't understand," Froggy said. "Why would they all be in the Otherworld?"

The Charming brothers looked at one another with very concerned expressions. They wanted to fill Froggy in but didn't know where to begin.

"Oh, Charlie, so many terrible things have happened since you've been gone," Chase said. "The Masked Man stole a potion from the late Fairy Godmother's chambers and used it to travel into the books from your library. He recruited a terrible army that attacked our world and imprisoned the citizens from every kingdom. He almost executed all the royal families, but thankfully Jack and Goldilocks saved us and brought us to the abandoned mine. After we escaped, the Masked Man's army turned on him, and now three horrible emperors are in power!"

“Unfortunately, I’m quite familiar with the emperors,” Froggy said. “I saw the Wicked Witch, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook through a mirror in the Northern Palace. I overheard them making plans to invade and conquer the Otherworld next—that’s why I need to find the twins immediately! I need to warn them the emperors’ army is coming!”

“The twins went into the Otherworld to recruit their own army,” Sleeping Beauty explained. “Jack, Goldilocks, Red, and Trollbella went to help them assemble it. They’ve already enlisted people from the worlds of literature, like the Tin Woodman from Oz, the Lost Boys from Neverland, and the Merry Men from the Sherwood Forest.”

Froggy thought his ears were deceiving him. “Did you say *Oz*? *Neverland? The Sherwood Forest?*” he repeated. “Well, they’ve certainly had quite an adventure without me. What sort of army are they assembling?”

“The twins are recruiting characters from Conner’s writing,” Rapunzel said.

Froggy’s mouth dropped open. “That’s *remarkable*,” he said. “But why go to such extremes? Aren’t there enough people in *this* world to fight the Literary Army? Surely, the Fairy Council could do something to help—”

“The Fairy Council was turned into stone long before us,” Sir Lampton said. “The Literary Army attacked the Fairy Kingdom first before ambushing the others. They came so quickly in the middle of the night, there was nothing we could do to prepare ourselves.”

Froggy had known things were bad, but he had no idea they were *this* bad. He sat on a boulder as the magnitude of the situation sank in.

“Just for the record, I’d like to remind everyone that I predicted *all* of this,” the Traveling Tradesman said. “Remember when I was using the Lost Boys’ marbles to foresee the future? I specifically said *worlds would collide*, and now look what’s happening—*worlds have collided, all right!*”

Hagetta rolled her eyes at the silly man. “Oh, shut up, you old geezer,” she said. “If you’re such a gifted psychic, then where was the warning about the Literary Army? Or the monster who turned us all into statues for a week?”

Regardless of the challenging times, Froggy still needed to warn the twins about the Literary Army’s next conquest. He leaped to his feet, more determined to find them than before.

“I need a way into the Otherworld,” he said. “How do the twins manage to get back and forth?”

Hagetta looked around the mine and retrieved the emerald-green *Land of Stories* treasury from the ground.

“They’ve been using this,” she said, and handed Froggy the book. “It’s been splashed with the Portal Potion. When the book is opened, a powerful beam of light projects from its pages. Step through the beam and you’ll enter the Otherworld.”

“Thank you,” Froggy said. “I just hope I’m not too late.”

“Do you want us to come with you?” Sir Grant asked.

“No, this world needs you more than I do,” Froggy said. “Once the Literary Army has crossed into the Otherworld, the rest of you should use their absence to liberate your people from the Northern Kingdom. There’s also a cottage just a few miles east of here by the river. You’ll find the missing children from the Corner Kingdom and Charming Kingdom in the basement. Take them with you and reunite them with their families.”

The royal families and the soldiers nodded—eager to finally be of service to their people again.

Rook stepped forward. “I want to come with you,” he said. “If Alex is even remotely in danger, I’m willing to do whatever I can to help her.”

“That’s out of the question,” Farmer Robins said. “An enormous army is headed for her world, Rook! It’s too dangerous! I won’t let you put yourself in harm’s way!”

“You don’t understand—I *have* to!” Rook declared. “I’m partly to blame for this whole mess. If I hadn’t led the Grande Armée to the royal families, the Masked Man would never have had the opportunity to steal the Portal Potion! I betrayed Alex and I’ve had to live with the guilt of a hundred men because of it. The only way I can redeem myself is by making things right. This may be my last opportunity to make it up to her—so I’m going and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

After seeing the determination in Rook’s eyes and hearing the passion in his voice, Farmer Robins knew there was no arguing with his son. Instead of debating him any further, the farmer clasped his son in a tight embrace.

“Be safe,” he said tearfully. “You’re all I’ve got left, Rook.”

“I will,” Rook said, and hugged his father back.

“Your father is right about one thing,” Sir Grant said. “The Otherworld

is going to be significantly more dangerous once the Literary Army enters it. Even if the twins have secured an army to fight them, the two of you shouldn't make the trip alone."

Froggy couldn't have agreed more. "We'll take the Fairy Council with us," he decided. "I have just enough tears left to free them. But we need to hurry—as far as we know, the army could already be headed to the Otherworld."

"Then we'll take Cornelius to the Fairy Kingdom," Rook suggested. "He'll get us there three times as fast as any horse could."

Rook whistled and the chubby unicorn stepped out from the group of animals. Cornelius loved being singled out and neighed arrogantly. Porridge, Buckle, and Oats grunted—there was nothing more annoying than a big-headed unicorn.

"Splendid," Froggy said. "We'll leave at once."

Froggy and Rook climbed aboard Cornelius and steered him out of the mine. The unicorn galloped as fast as a race car. They charged through the Dwarf Forests and sped across the Charming Kingdom, and within two hours of their departure, they were already approaching the Fairy Palace in the Fairy Kingdom—or at least what was left of it.

The destruction was a devastating sight. The golden pillars and arches of the majestic palace had been blown to pieces by the *Jolly Roger*'s mighty cannons. The vibrant gardens surrounding the palace had been burned to a crisp and were covered in debris. In the center of the ruins, Froggy, Rook, and Cornelius found the statues of Rosette, Tangerina, Xanthous, Emerelda, Skylene, Violetta, and Coral. The colorful Fairy Council was just as pale, stiff, and frozen with fear as the people had been in the abandoned mine.

"What kind of monster is capable of *this*?" Rook asked.

"It wasn't her fault," Froggy said. "It was the monsters *behind* the monster—they're the ones to blame."

Froggy jumped down from Cornelius's back and approached the statues with his bottle of Medusa's tears. Just as he was about to pour the first teardrop into Emerelda's stone eye, the sound of approaching footsteps came from behind him. Froggy turned and saw a group of strange men walking toward them.

"Quick," he whispered. *"We need to hide."*

Froggy, Rook, and Cornelius dived behind a fallen pillar—although it

was much more difficult for the chubby unicorn to crouch behind it. They watched the strange men as they entered the palace ruins. There were eleven men in total, each wearing the armor of a knight. They inspected the damage with their swords raised. The men also carried large shields, but Froggy didn't recognize the crest painted across them.

"Who are they?" Rook whispered.

"I have no idea," Froggy said. "They aren't from any kingdom I'm familiar—"

"DON'T MOVE!"

Froggy, Rook, and Cornelius cautiously looked over their shoulders and saw that a twelfth knight had snuck up behind them. He was a very handsome and muscular young man. He held his sword just a few inches from their faces.

"I've found a couple of scoundrels hiding in the debris!" he called to the other knights.

"I beg your pardon," Froggy said. "Who do you think you're calling a scoundrel?"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" the knight asked.

"Who do you think *you're* talking to?" Froggy repeated.

"I happen to be a *king*, thank you ever so much," the knight declared.

"Well, *so am I*!" Froggy announced.

"Then *you* must be responsible for damaging the palace!" the knight said, and raised his sword, preparing to strike.

"ARTIE, CUT IT OUT! HE'S WITH US!"

A split second before being sliced open, Froggy was saved by a familiar raspy voice. He looked into the singed gardens and saw an elderly couple approaching the ruins. Froggy recognized the woman the moment he laid eyes on her.

"Mother Goose!" he yelled.

"Hey, Charlie!" she said. "Long time no see!"

Mother Goose gave Froggy a hard but friendly pat on the back.

"Hey, Merlin," she called to the old man behind her. "This is the guy I was telling you about—the prince who was cursed as a frog, then got kidnapped at his own wedding, and then got thrown into a magic mirror!"

"Oh, my poor tragic fellow," Merlin said, and vigorously shook Froggy's hand. "It's such a pleasure to finally meet you! And my

condolences, you know, *about your life*."

"Hey, Charlie, how'd you get out of the mirror?" Mother Goose said.

"I escaped," he said. "It's a long story—where have *you* been all this time?"

"Oh, I moved to another dimension," Mother Goose said. "Alex and I got trapped in the world of Camelot while we were chasing the Masked Man. I took one look at *this* handsome devil and knew it was time to settle down."

Mother Goose winked flirtatiously at Merlin, and the wizard kissed her hand.

"Wait a moment, you mean that's *the real Merlin*?" Froggy asked in disbelief.

"The one and only," Mother Goose said. "And this is our squire, Artie—oops, I mean *King Arthur*! Sorry, Artie, old habits die hard."

"*You're* King Arthur?" Froggy asked.

Arthur became defensive. "Yes," he said. "Is there a problem?"

"Not at all," Froggy said. "You just seem so…*young*. I always imagined King Arthur as an older man with a beard and an unpleasant scowl."

"Artie wasn't supposed to be king until he was much older," Mother Goose explained. "He started having nightmares about Alex and wanted to come check on her. I told him if he finished his training I'd take him to the fairy-tale world to see her. Well, I didn't think he was serious about it, but the kid pulled the sword from the stone and founded the Knights of the Round Table in just a couple of days!"

"Knights are much easier to persuade when they're teenagers," Arthur said.

"We had never heard of a *round table*, but we didn't have anything else better to do," one of the knights said with a shrug.

"Right—what was your name again?" Arthur asked him.

"It's *Lancelot*, Your Grace," he said. "Anyway, a crusade sure sounded like fun—so here we are."

Rook looked Arthur up and down, instantly intimidated by the young king.

"So you and Alex are *friends*?" he asked.

"I'd say we're more than just *acquainted*," Arthur said with a telling grin.

“Well, *I* was her first kiss,” Rook bragged.

“Well, *I’ll* be her last,” Arthur quipped.

Rook roared and charged toward Arthur, intending to tackle him. In one swift motion, Arthur threw Rook over his shoulder and pinned him to the ground under his boot.

“Boys, knock it off!” Merlin said. “We don’t have time for an adolescent love triangle—there are *much* bigger issues in this story.”

“Speaking of which, *what the heck happened to the Fairy Palace*?” Mother Goose said. “This place looks like New Year’s Eve at Pompeii! And the Fairy Council is as stiff on the outside as they were on the inside! Charlie, what’s going on in this world?”

Froggy let out a deep sigh. “It’s been attacked by an atrocious army of literary characters,” he explained. “The Wicked Witch from Oz, the Queen of Hearts from Wonderland, and Captain Hook from Neverland have joined forces and taken over the kingdoms! And recently, they’ve set their sights on the Otherworld. I’m on my way there to warn the twins the army is coming!”

“Then it wasn’t a dream,” Arthur said. “Alex really *is* in trouble! We’ve got to save her!”

“All right, all right, all right,” Mother Goose said. “Artie, you can say *I told you so* later—but right now we’ve got to get our keisters into the Otherworld and help the twins! Lead the way, Charlie—we’re coming with you!”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Froggy said. “But first, I need to *loosen up* the Fairy Council.”

“Good luck,” Mother Goose said with a snort. “I’ve been trying to loosen up those broads for centuries.”

Froggy hopped to the statues in the center of the destruction and placed two drops of Medusa’s tears in each of their eyes. Just like the people in the mine, the Fairy Council began to wiggle, shake, and crack. With seven bright, colorful blasts, the stone covering their bodies exploded and the council was finally free. The fairies looked around at their ruined home in shock. Emerelda, however, remained as stoic as ever. As if she had been deep in thought during her entire time as a statue, the leader of the Fairy Council emerged from the spell knowing exactly what needed to be done next.

"Alex," Emerelda said sharply. *"We need to find Alex."*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WORLDS COLLIDE

Within a few hours after the witches occupied Central Park, the number of US Marines under General Wilson's command had doubled, and more were on their way from military bases around the country. The soldiers formed a line that stretched along Central Park's six-mile perimeter, and snipers were repositioned on the balconies of penthouse apartments facing the park. There was no possible way anything could escape the park without going through the Marines—not that anything could get through Alex's magic shield. They had only seen the shield disappear once all night, but it had been reinstated so quickly, the Marines thought it was wisest to keep their distance.

Unfortunately, General Wilson had positioned his soldiers in the wrong location. The witches still had several hours before their gingerbread army was finished baking. The real threat was approaching from *behind* the Marines—but by the time they saw it coming, it was already too late.

"Sir, I have good news!" a soldier reported to General Wilson.

"What is it?" the general asked.

"We've located Cornelia Grimm," the soldier replied. "She should be here within the hour."

"Thank you, Sergeant," General Wilson said. "I want to be notified the minute she arrives."

Suddenly, Fifth Avenue started to rumble with the power of an earthquake. The Marines searched the street to see what was causing the commotion but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. However, the

soldiers felt the tremor grow stronger and stronger the closer they walked to the New York Public Library.

As they approached the library's front steps, a thunderous explosion prompted all the Marines to dive to the ground. They looked up and saw a massive pirate ship burst out of the library's roof and soar into the air. The ship was followed by swarms of winged creatures—*monkeys*, as far as they could tell. Once the sky was filled with the mysterious beasts, fleets of strangely shaped soldiers charged out of the library's damaged entrance with their swords and staffs raised above their heads.

"General, we're under attack—again!" shouted a Marine. "What are your orders, sir?"

General Wilson watched in total shock as the literary characters emerged from the library. Apparently the witches were just the prelude of a painfully long performance, and for the first time all night, the general doubted they'd make it to the curtain call.

"Sir, your orders?" the Marine asked again.

"*Pray*, Sergeant," the general ordered. "At this point, it's all we *can* do."

As the sun rose over New York City, a floating procession of fictional proportions flew over northern New Jersey. An enormous spacecraft, a large blimp, a colorful jet, and a flying pirate ship transported Conner's family, friends, and characters toward the Empire State.

"We should start looking for a place to land," Charlotte said from inside the blimp. "Look over there—it's *Liberty Island*! That's perfect!"

Emgee gave her a thumbs-up and gradually steered the blimp toward the lawns behind the Statue of Liberty. Once the *Charlie Chaplin* landed safely, the *BASK-8*, the *Dolly Llama*, and the Ziblings' jet joined it on the island.

Charlotte, Bob, Trollbella, the Tin Woodman, and Lester rode aboard the blimp with Beau Rogers and Emgee. Unfortunately, they also had to share it with Bones and all the mummies from the Pyramid of Anesthesia. After traveling across the country with the undead in a tight space, the smell was almost unbearable. Trollbella yanked opened the door and jumped out of

the blimp before it came to a complete stop.

"Thank the Troblin Heavens—fresh air!" she gasped. "I don't think I'll ever get the stench of death out of my clothes! I smell like the Breemonster's breath!"

The *BASK-8* lowered its ramp and the Cyborg Queen rolled out of the spacecraft with Commander Newters and the Cyborg soldiers following behind her. Captain Auburn Sally kicked down her ship's gangplank and she, Admiral Jacobson, their crew, the Merry Men, and the Rosary Chicken exited the *Dolly Llama*. The Blissworm's cocoon had been hung at the top of the mast beside the ship's flag.

The Ziblings lowered the steps of their jet, and the superheroes climbed down with Professor Wallet, Blubo, Peter Pan, and the Lost Boys.

"That! Was! AWESOME!" Tootles cheered. "Can we ride the jet again?"

"If you think *that* was fast, you should see the Ziblings' rocket our dad is building!" Bolt bragged.

Riding the Ziblings' jet made the Lost Boys euphoric, but Peter Pan looked like the saddest boy in the world.

"Peter, what's wrong?" Professor Wallet asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," Peter said with a sigh. "I just never thought people would invent *machines* that could fly. I mean, it sort of defeats the purpose of *me* if everyone can do it."

"My dear boy, who do you think the rest of the world has been trying to catch up with all these years?" Professor Wallet said with a twinkle in his eye.

Once everyone had exited their various methods of transportation, Charlotte gathered Conner's binder of short stories, the emerald-green treasury, and the Portal Potion, and led the characters to the grassy field directly below the Statue of Liberty. They looked across the Hudson River at the island of Manhattan and could see smoke bellowing from somewhere in Midtown. After closer inspection, they could see the *Jolly Roger* and flying monkeys snaking through the city's skyscrapers.

"Oh no!" Charlotte gasped. "The Literary Army is already here!"

"What should we do now?" Bob asked.

"I'm trying to think," Charlotte said. "Call me crazy, but I've never orchestrated a *war* before."

The emerald-green storybook suddenly started to glow in her hands. Charlotte dropped the book on the grass and it opened, shining a beam of light toward the sky. Froggy hopped out of the beam and looked around Liberty Island. His mouth dropped open at the sight of the New York skyline across the river and the Statue of Liberty towering above him.

"So *this* is the Otherworld," he said in amazement. "I can't imagine why the twins would ever leave a place like this."

"Froggy, how did you get here?" Charlotte asked. "The twins told me you were trapped in a magic mirror!"

"Hello, Mrs. Gordon," he said. "I'd love to stay and catch up, but it's urgent I speak with the twins! Where might they be?"

Charlotte pointed to the New York skyline. "They're in there somewhere."

Froggy looked toward Manhattan and noticed the smoke, the flying monkeys, and the *Jolly Roger* hovering above Midtown.

"The army's already arrived!" he said. "We're too late!"

"You mean, you're not alone?" Charlotte asked.

As soon as she asked the question, Charlotte had the answer. Mother Goose, Merlin, Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table emerged from the beam of light in a straight line. Cornelius galloped out of the beam next with Rook on his back, followed by the seven members of the Fairy Council.

"Well, take a look at all these theatrics," Mother Goose said as she scanned the island. "Are these the characters from Conner's short stories or am I back at Burning Man?"

Lester was overjoyed to see Mother Goose. He wrapped his wings around her and the two embraced.

"Squawk!" the gander said as he nuzzled his beak under her chin.

"I've missed you, too, Lester," Mother Goose said. "Gosh, I leave you alone for a couple of weeks and the whole universe starts falling apart!"

"You guys sure are a sight for sore eyes," Charlotte said. "We could really use your help. New York City is under attack! The witches and the Literary Army have crossed into the Otherworld!"

"The *witches*?" Emerelda asked. "What on earth are they doing in the Otherworld?"

"I imagine the same thing as the Literary Army," Mother Goose said.

“Come on, Emerelda, you can’t be *that* surprised. It’s just like the kids say: *Witches be witches*.”

“They kidnapped Alex a week ago and have put her under some sort of spell,” Charlotte informed them. “Conner and his friends came to the city yesterday to find her, but now we’re not certain where any of them are. Before she was kidnapped, Alex helped Conner assemble an army from his short stories to fight the Literary Army, but I’m not exactly qualified to lead them.”

If there was ever a moment where someone with natural leadership skills would be of use, this was it. Arthur looked at Merlin and the wizard nodded —*it was the young king’s time to shine*. Arthur scaled the side of the Statue of Liberty’s platform and whistled down to get everyone’s attention.

“Everyone listen up,” he said. “We’ve got people to find and an army to defeat. We’ll accomplish neither of these things if we just stand around scratching our heads. So first things first—*Lester*, I want you to do a lap around the city and see if you can spot either Alex or her brother. Come back to us the moment you see something.”

Lester saluted the young king and took off at once.

“As for the rest of you, we’ll need to split up into *four* teams,” Arthur instructed. “*Team one* will go after the witches, *team two* will face Captain Hook and his pirates, *team three* will confront the Wicked Witch, the Winkies, and the flying monkeys, and *team four* will track down the Queen of Hearts and her card soldiers.”

All the characters were confused. None of them had the slightest clue who this bossy young man was.

“EXCUSE ME, BUT WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? THE KING OF ENGLAND?” Robin Hood asked.

“That’s *exactly* who he is,” Mother Goose announced. “Everyone, meet King Arthur! He just pulled the sword out of the stone back in Camelot!”

“OH,” Robin Hood said. “IN THAT CASE, *CARRY ON*!”

Arthur let the disrespect roll off his back and dived into planning mode.

“Before we storm the city, it’s crucial we know how to defeat the villains we’re up against,” he said. “Does anyone know how to defeat Captain Hook or the Queen of Hearts or the Wicked Witch?”

Liberty Island went completely silent as everyone thought about it. The Lost Boys, Blubo, and the Tin Woodman had always *dreamed* about

destroying the villains from their home worlds, but none of them knew how to actually go about it.

"Gosh, it's been so long since I read those books," Charlotte said.

"Oh, I know!" Bob announced. "Wait—never mind, that was how they did it in the movie, not the book."

"Oh come now," Arthur said encouragingly. "There's got to be *someone* who knows about their weaknesses!"

To the rest of the crew's surprise, Catfish Kate raised a hand. "Master Bailey knew how to defeat Smoky-Sails Sam," the pirate said. "I bet *he* would know exactly how to defeat Captain Hook, the Queen of Hearts, and the Wicked Witch!"

"You idiot," High-Tide Tabitha said. "That was because Smoky-Sails Sam was Master Bailey's character—the captain, the queen, and the witch aren't his creations."

"Then who *is* their creator?" Arthur asked. "We must speak to him immediately!"

"You can't," Bob said. "James M. Barrie, Lewis Carroll, and L. Frank Baum have all been dead for decades."

Charlotte didn't want to give up just yet, so she imagined what Alex or Conner would do to get the answers they needed. Her eyes were drawn to the binder of short stories and the flask of Portal Potion in her hands.

"Wait a second," she said. "Maybe it *is* possible to speak to them. If we wrote a story where the authors came back to life, we could use the Portal Potion to enter the story and ask them how to defeat their characters!"

"Holy Mary Shelley," Mother Goose said. "It's both brilliant and immoral—just like me!"

"I'm more than willing to break some morality clauses if it means saving the world," Charlotte said. "Who's got a pen?"

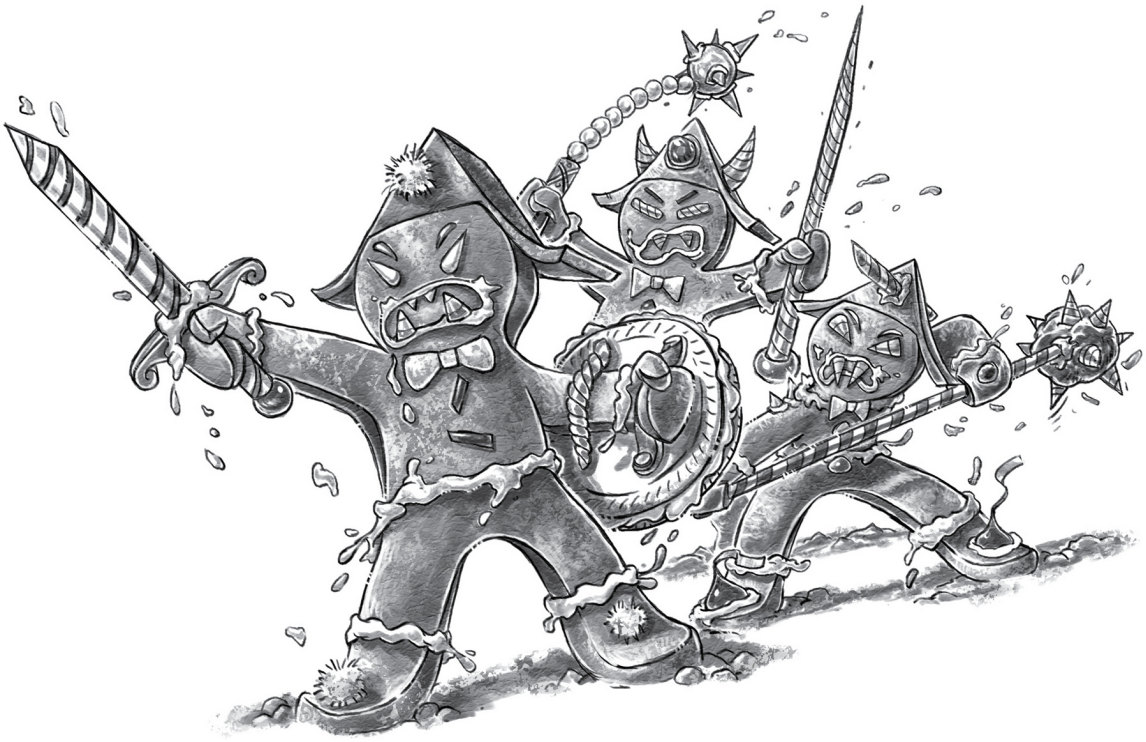
Beau Rogers handed Charlotte a pen from inside his leather jacket. She sat on the ground and quickly jotted down the short story she had in mind on a blank page in Conner's binder. Once she was finished, Charlotte poured a few drops of the Portal Potion on the story, and a beam of light shot out from it.

"Here goes nothing," she said.

Charlotte stepped through the beam and entered a bright and endless space. The words from her story floated in the air all around her. She

watched in wonder as the words started to stretch and gain color and texture. Soon Charlotte found herself in a dark room with three empty chairs. The words *James M. Barrie, Lewis Carroll*, and *L. Frank Baum* slowly transformed into the men they described, and the authors materialized before her eyes.

"Hello, gentlemen," Charlotte said. "We need to talk."



Chapter Eighteen

FAIRIES VS. WITCHES

Once the battery on Bree's cell phone died, Conner and his friends had no way of tracking the time. They felt like they had been trapped in the candy cane cage for days, but whether that was due to the time alteration or their anxiety was anyone's guess. The escapees they'd met under the Bethesda Terrace and the captives in the other cages all sat silently. They watched the horrible events around them as if they were trapped in a nightmare they couldn't wake from.

Goldilocks hadn't sat down once since they were put inside the cage. Her eyes never left Hero as he bounced around in the BabyBjörn attached to Rat Mary. Eventually, the infant became hungry and started to cry. Instead of giving him back to his mother, Rat Mary tried feeding him a bottle of bright green elixir—a potion Conner and his friends didn't recognize. Hero smelled the liquid and wisely refused it.

"Attaboy," Goldilocks whispered.

After the ovens were filled to capacity with baking gingerbread soldiers, the witches gave the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America a new task. All the cauldrons and trays were moved to the side of the Great Lawn and replaced with piles of candy. The witches gave the Scouts welding tools and ordered them to make weapons out of the sweets. The children made candy cane swords, lollipop axes, licorice whips, candy apple ball and chains, and gummy bear nunchakus. The Scouts piled their finished creations in the center of the lawn, and the arsenal grew a foot taller with every passing hour.

To say that the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts were exhausted was an understatement—it was a miracle they were still conscious. The children had been working non-stop since before Conner and his friends had even arrived at the witches' base. Many of the Scouts started nodding off as they made the candy weapons, but they would quickly sit up before one of the witches could punish them. Although Conner's adrenaline kept him alert, watching the tired Scouts put him in touch with his own fatigue. He leaned his head against the bars of the candy cane cage and, against his will, fell into a deep, deep sleep.

Conner dreamed he was standing in his old neighborhood in front of his old house. It wasn't the boxy rental house the twins had moved to after their father died, but the house their family lived in while he was still alive. It was painted blue with white trim and had so many windows, the house looked like it was wearing a pleasant smile. The front yard was groomed to perfection, and there was a large oak tree the twins loved climbing when they were little.

Oblivious to the horrors in his waking life, Conner smiled at the lovely sight of his former home.

"I must be stressed about something," he said to himself. "I only dream about this house when I'm upset."

Conner walked up the winding path through his mother's rose garden and entered the house through the front door. He expected to step into a cozy living room with tufted sofas, a small white piano, and all the other furniture they'd had to sell when they moved. But the front of their old house was barely recognizable because the entire room was covered in papers. Handwritten notes were taped to the walls, pinned to the sofas, and spread across the floor and all the surfaces. Not an inch of the living room was visible.

"Well, that's odd," Conner said. "I must have eaten something funky right before bed to be dreaming this. I wonder what it's supposed to symbolize."

The handwriting was the same on all the notes and looked very familiar, but it wasn't his own. Conner pulled one off the wall to read it:

Conner,

I've been trying to contact you for days but we're never asleep at the same time. If things escalate to what I'm afraid of, then I know you'll be dreaming about our old house eventually—you always do when you're troubled. Please forgive the mess I made in your subconscious, but it's very important I get this message to you.

This won't be easy to read, but please hear me out. As you know by now, I've been cursed—probably with the most powerful curse that's ever been created. It's turned me into an angry, vengeful, and miserable person. It's as if the witches have transformed me into Ezmia, and it makes me wonder if they were the ones behind her undoing all along.

Unlike the Enchantress, the witches have found a way to keep me entirely in their control—and that's what worries me the most. They've forced me to do so many terrible things already, but I'll never be able to forgive myself if I harm someone I love. So I'm begging you, *don't give the witches the chance*. You can't stop the curse, but you can prevent me from doing the unthinkable, by stopping *me*.

I understand that what I'm asking is a burden no brother should ever be asked to bear, but you're the only person I can trust to get it done. You've seen the magic I'm capable of when I'm upset; if the witches unleash it, the Otherworld could be destroyed. That's why you and you alone must make sure it doesn't happen. By taking my life, you'll be saving the lives of millions, and we both know it's a worthy sacrifice.

I've had a wonderful life, Conner. The adventures we've shared over the years are what dreams are made of. I can't imagine having a better family, better friends, or better memories. That's why I can willingly "*return to magic*" without any reservations. I look forward to watching over you and Mom with Dad and Grandma at my side.

I love you with all my heart and am forever proud to be your sister,

Alex

Conner knew he was experiencing much more than a dream. He ripped up the note as if it would make the request disappear, but every note in the

sitting room was scribbled with the same message. Conner whirled through the house and tore every paper he could get his hands on, but the message rang out loud and clear: *Alex was asking Conner to kill her.*

Even in his sleep, the thought of harming his sister made Conner's heart race and beads of sweat run down his face. Soon he felt two pairs of hands on him, shaking him awake.

"Conner, wake up!" Jack said.

"Sorry!" Conner gasped, and quickly sat up. "How long was I out?"

"An hour or two," Bree said. "Then you started going full *Exorcist* on us."

"I was having a nightmare, but it wasn't *just* a nightmare," Conner said. "Alex has been trying to communicate with me in our dreams. She covered our childhood home in letters asking me to *kill her*! She thinks the only way we can save the Otherworld is by taking her life!"

"That's terrible!" Red said. "Just because someone is dangerous doesn't mean they have to be *killed* to be stopped. Think about the Evil Queen—oh wait, I suppose that mirror thing was worse than death…. Well, think about the Enchantress—oh yeah, never mind…. But General Marquis—oops, he *really* died…. Well, the Masked Man didn't—oh, that's right, he *did*…. Sorry, I thought there were plenty of examples. You know, maybe Alex has a point—"

"We're *not* killing my sister," Conner said. "I refuse to believe there isn't a way to break the curse she's under! Alex's emotions are being affected right now and she's jumping to conclusions. We'll find a way to help her."

"Yes, we will," Goldilocks said confidently. "I know exactly what's going through Alex's mind right now. It wasn't long ago that I was in her shoes. She's feeling scared, embarrassed, and guilty, and she thinks there's no coming back from the place she's at. But luckily for her, she's got us to set her straight."

"Oh, it's *Goldilocks*!" Red declared with a snap of her fingers. "*She's* the example I was looking for! Goldie was a lonely, miserable, and ill-tempered thief when we first met. But thanks to my friendship, she's turned her life around and become a social, happy, and balanced woman."

Goldilocks sighed. "What can I say? I owe it all to you, Red."

"You're quite welcome," Red said. "What I did for Goldilocks is exactly

what we need to do for Alex. If she insists on being killed, then we'll just have to *love her to death*."

Conner and his friends nodded politely and gazed outside the cage, hoping Red wouldn't come up with any more nonsensical anecdotes. On the west side of the Great Lawn, they watched Charcoaline as she inspected the giant ovens. The gingerbread soldiers had been baking for hours, and Conner had been wondering how much time they needed. Charcoaline cackled with delight and rang a large bell.

"Your Excellencies! Our army is finished!" Charcoaline announced.

The Snow Queen and the Sea Witch stood up from their thrones, and eerie smiles spread across their faces.

"Release them from the ovens!" the Snow Queen commanded. "And line up the children. They must *greet* the army they've created."

The witches rounded up the Boy and Girl Scouts and forced them to stand in groups facing the ovens. Charcoaline pulled open the door of each oven, and smoke filled the air. Like something straight from a horror movie, hundreds of gingerbread soldiers slowly crept out of the smoky ovens like zombies, moaning like the ghosts of tortured souls. They were tall, their bodies were burned, and they left behind trails of crumbs as they walked.

"You must be starving," the Sea Witch hissed. "Come, have a snack and gain your strength before the big battle."

The gingerbread soldiers skulked toward the groups of Scouts. The children tried to step back from the frightening cookies, but none of them could move. They looked down and discovered that Tarantulene had sprayed the grass with her web—*the Scouts' feet were stuck to the ground!* Conner and his friends didn't understand the point of this, but as they watched the gingerbread soldiers approach the children, it all made sense.

"They're going to feed the Scouts to the gingerbread soldiers!" Conner exclaimed.

"That's horrible!" Red said.

"Obscene!" Goldilocks said.

"We have to do something!" Bree said.

Conner and his friends jumped to their feet and shook the bars of their candy cane cage, but no matter how hard they shook them, the bars never budged. The Boy and Girl Scouts started screaming as the gingerbread soldiers crept closer. The demonic cookies opened their wide mouths and

revealed their sharp candy corn teeth.

"Alex, you've got to help those kids!" Conner yelled at her. "The sister I know and love would never stand by as innocent children were devoured—no matter what kind of curse she was under! Come on, you've got to fight it! You've got to save them!"

For a brief moment, the expression on his sister's face changed. Alex tightened her brow, clenched her jaw, and made fists with her hands. Conner could tell she was fighting the curse with every fiber of her being. Her glowing eyes started to fade, her floating hair started to fall, and the shield she was keeping up around Central Park began to flicker like a dying lightbulb, until it finally disappeared.

"Don't let him distract you!" the Snow Queen screeched at her. "Keep the shield steady!"

The command reinforced the curse. The expression faded from Alex's face, her eyes glowed brighter than before, her hair floated back above her head, and the shield reappeared around Central Park. However, the brief moments she had managed to let the force field down had been long enough for a few familiar characters to sneak through it. A split second before the gingerbread army took their first bite out of the Boy and Girl Scouts, a colorful cavalcade suddenly charged out of the trees.

Mother Goose and Merlin swooped onto the Great Lawn aboard Lester's back, and the Fairy Council soared through the air beside them. On the ground below, Froggy and Rook rode in on Cornelius, while Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table stormed onto the lawn on foot. Conner and his friends were shocked and ecstatic to see their friends arrive.

"Am I seeing things or is that Mother Goose and the Fairy Council?" Jack asked.

"It is—and they've come in the nick of time!" Goldilocks cried.

"And Charlie's with them!" Red shouted in disbelief.

"How is this possible?" Conner asked. "The Fairy Council were statues, Mother Goose was in Camelot, and Froggy was trapped in a magic mirror!"

"Who cares?" Red snapped. "After all the crap we've been through, just be glad we have some happy questions for a change!"

The Scouts had no idea who any of the newcomers were, but their flashy entrance was enough to distract the gingerbread soldiers from eating them. The unexpected company infuriated the witches beyond belief. They had

come so far; they weren't going to let anything stop them now. The Snow Queen, the Sea Witch, Charcoaline, Arboris, Tarantulene, Serpentina, and Rat Mary formed a line at the south end of the Great Lawn, preventing the newcomers from coming any closer. The other witches cowered at the sight of the Fairy Council and hid behind the ovens.

The Fairy Council, Mother Goose, Merlin, and Lester landed on the lawn in front of the witches. Froggy, Rook, Cornelius, Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table joined the fairies and stood by their sides. The fairies and the witches stared at one another for a tense moment before anyone said a word.

"Release these children and surrender your army at once!" Emerelda demanded.

"Or *what*?" the Snow Queen asked.

"Or we'll remove them from you," Xanthous said.

The witches glanced at one another and roared with cocky laughter.

"Is that so?" the Sea Witch asked. "And how exactly is that going to happen? After all, fairies can only use their magic to help others."

"Witch, *please*," Mother Goose said. "We're the ones who write the rules, and we can break them just as easily as you."

"This is your last warning," Skylene said. "You *will* surrender and go back to the kingdoms where you belong."

"Don't be foolish and make this worse than it needs to be," Tangerina said.

"The witches are *not* going back to the old world!" the Snow Queen screeched. "We're sick of your limitations, sick of your regulations, and sick of your laws! Your kind has forced us into the shadows for centuries—so we left the kingdoms before you could suppress us into oblivion! We've found our own world to rule as we please, and there isn't room for fairies here!"

"You mistake our mercy for mistreatment," Emerelda said. "If our goal was to exterminate you, we would have done it a long time ago. Your survival is thanks to our *generosity* and nothing more. We've never *suppressed you*, we've simply protected the innocent people you harm without remorse—and a new world isn't going to stop us."

"Then let's settle this once and for all," the Sea Witch hissed. "If the universe isn't big enough for both the fairies and the witches, it's high time

we take our proper place on the magical food chain! Sisters, if we want a world for ourselves *we must destroy the fairies*!"

The witches charged toward the fairies, and an overdue battle of good versus evil began. Each member of the Fairy Council paired with a witch and spread out across the Great Lawn to duel.

Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table dashed toward the gingerbread soldiers with their swords raised. The soldiers collected weapons from the candy arsenal and fought the young king and his knights. The gingerbread soldiers were easy to disarm and slay, but they greatly outnumbered Arthur and his knights; battling the giant cookies wasn't going to be a piece of cake.

Alex's location was no longer a mystery to any of the newcomers. She was clearly visible on the hill at the north end of the Great Lawn. So while the fairies and witches were dueling, Froggy hopped around the lawn looking for Conner and the others. The only thing on Rook's agenda was getting Alex to safety, so he cautiously steered Cornelius through the fighting knights and soldiers toward the hill. Mother Goose and Merlin raced to the groups of Boy and Girl Scouts. With a snap of their fingers, the spiderweb around the Scouts' feet vanished and the children were free.

"As I said to the Children's Crusade of 1212: *Get out of here, kiddos! This isn't your fight!*" Mother Goose said.

In true Boy and Girl Scout fashion, before running to safety, the Scouts ran to the candy cane cages and freed the witches' prisoners. Oliver used a lollipop axe to slice the lock off the cage that held Conner and his friends.

"Hey, I know you!" Oliver said. "You guys were on my flight!"

"Oliver, you've got to get all these other people out of here," Conner said. "Take everyone to the southwest corner of the park. You'll find an opening to an abandoned subway tunnel at the base of a hill. Crawl into the tunnel and follow it as far away as you can get!"

"But what about you and your friends?" Oliver asked.

"We'll be okay," Conner said. "Believe it or not, we're actually used to this kind of stuff. Now hurry—before the witches see you!"

Oliver nodded and saluted Conner. Once he got their attention, Oliver led all the Scouts, their troop leaders, the escapees from the Bethesda Fountain, and all the other captives off the Great Lawn and toward the southwest corner of Central Park.

“What should we do now? Get Alex?” Bree asked.

Conner glanced up at his sister, but she hadn’t moved a muscle since the battle had started.

“She’ll be fine for the time being,” he said. “But those dudes fighting the gingerbread soldiers look like they could use our help!”

Conner and his friends dashed to the arsenal of candy weapons. Conner and Goldilocks picked up candy cane swords, Jack took a lollipop axe, Bree chose a licorice whip, and although she had no idea what they were, Red selected gummy bear nunchakus. Once they were armed, Conner and his friends joined Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and helped them battle the gingerbread soldiers.

“You must be Alex’s brother!” Arthur said as he decapitated a soldier.

“That’s me,” Conner said. “Who are you?”

“I’m King Arthur and these are my Knights of the Round Table,” Arthur said.

“From *Camelot*?” Conner asked. “What are you guys doing in Central Park?”

“Long story short, I’m sort of your sister’s boyfriend,” the young king disclosed.

“Boyfriend?” Conner asked as he sliced a soldier in half. “Alex never mentioned she had a boyfriend!”

“Well, we haven’t defined the relationship yet,” Arthur said.

This surprised Conner more than anything else in the park so far.

“If we survive this, you and I are going to have a chat about your intentions,” he warned.

As their friends fought the gingerbread soldiers, Jack and Goldilocks saw Rat Mary and Hero on the other side of the lawn. The couple moved through the soldiers in the direction of their son, slicing through them as if they were overgrown weeds. Bree seemed to be enjoying the fight; she giggled as she swung the licorice whip around her like a lion tamer.

“Is that your girlfriend?” Arthur asked Conner.

“Sort of,” Conner said. “We haven’t defined our relationship, either.”

Bree cracked the whip with such gusto that all the gingerbread soldiers were afraid to get near her. Even Conner kept his distance.

“Wow,” Arthur said. “If I were you, I’d have someone ask her about *her* intentions.”

Red tried getting as involved in the fight as her friends, but she had no idea how to use her gummy bear nunchakus. Every time she tried swinging them, she ended up whacking herself in the face. The awkward movement made her easy to spot in the crowd.

"Red, there you are!" Froggy said. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

"Charlie!" she exclaimed. "I've missed you so much!"

Red jumped into Froggy's arms and kissed him all over his green face. A gingerbread soldier snuck up behind the couple and raised his lollipop axe above their heads. Red was outraged by the interruption.

"Excuse me? Can't you see we're in the middle of a reunion?" she asked.

Instead of using her gummy bear nunchakus, Red smacked the gingerbread soldier in the face with her purse. The blow knocked off the soldier's head, and its body crumpled to the ground.

"I swear, these purchases are the gifts that keep on giving," Red said.

Conner saw Froggy and worked his way through the gingerbread soldiers to greet him.

"Froggy! I'm so glad to see you!" he said.

"Likewise, my friend," Froggy said. "I've spent days searching for you! I was trying to warn you the Literary Army was coming, but they beat me to it. Fortunately, your mother and the characters from your stories have also arrived and are dealing with the army as we speak."

"Thanks for the update," Conner said. "Let's hurry up and defeat these witches so we can join them—they're gonna need our help."

While Conner and his friends finished off the gingerbread soldiers, the duels between the fairies and the witches were intensifying by the second.

Rosette and Arboris were going head-to-head in a heated brawl. The witch pointed at the grass, and large tree roots snapped up from the ground and knocked the fairy backward. Rosette retaliated by throwing a handful of seeds at the witch. A family of Venus flytraps immediately rose out of the dirt around Arboris's feet and pinned the witch to the ground with their snapping mouths.

Bugs crawled out of Arboris's skin and chewed on the flytraps until the witch was free. Arboris then hit the ground with her fist and sent a massive wave through the grass that knocked Rosette on her back. The fairy waved

her hand, and a cluster of rosebushes with enormous thorns grew in a circle around the witch.

Rosette spun her finger, and the rosebushes began to twirl around Arboris like the blades of a blender. The witch screamed as the thorns scratched and sliced her. By the time the roses stopped spinning, Arboris had been decomposed into nothing but a pile of mulch.

"Even this rose has her thorns," Rosette said, and blew on her fingertip like it was a smoking gun.

Tangerina and Tarantulene were locked eye-to-eye as they fought. The witch kicked the fairy with all four of her legs and hit her with all four of her hands. A swarm of bees flew out of Tangerina's beehive and circled Tarantulene, stinging her arms and legs wherever they could.

The witch sprayed the bees with spiderweb and then showered the fairy with it—sticking Tangerina's whole body to the ground. Tarantulene then stood over the fairy, preparing to strike her with her long fangs. But Tangerina managed to free one of her hands from the web, and she pointed at the witch. Honey erupted from the fairy's finger and covered Tarantulene from head to toe. The honey quickly hardened and trapped the witch inside a large golden blob.

"It's *honey* that attracts the flies, darling," Tangerina said. "You should try it."

Across the Great Lawn, Xanthous was caught in a battle with the Snow Queen. Unfortunately for him, *nothing* about their fight was heated. The witch pointed her cane at the fairy, and sharp icicles shot out of it like bullets. Xanthous dived out of their path, but there were too many to avoid. One icicle pierced his shoulder and another pierced his thigh, pinning poor Xanthous to a tree. The fairy screamed in agony and the witch cackled with satisfaction. The flames on Xanthous's head and shoulders spread across his body until he was completely covered in fire and the icicles impaling him melted away.

The witch lifted the cloth covering her eyes, and an icy chill blew out from her empty eye sockets. Xanthous shielded himself with a wall of fire, but he struggled to keep it up. The wind grew stronger and stronger while the temperature became colder and colder. It was so cold, the Snow Queen's face started to freeze, and soon her whole body was covered in ice.

"I always loved extinguishing little flamers like you!" the Snow Queen

said.

“Do you know what they say about icy old queens?” Xanthous asked. “The colder the heart, the easier she melts.”

A ball of fire appeared in Xanthous’s hand, and he threw it at the Snow Queen. The fireball collided with the witch and exploded. The heat was so severe, it melted all the ice covering the Snow Queen’s body, and the witch vanished.

The Snow Queen’s polar bears were furious at seeing their mistress destroyed. They charged across the Great Lawn, intending to rip Xanthous limb from limb. Mother Goose and Merlin stepped into the bears’ path and blocked the beasts from attacking the fairy.

“My dear, I think it’s time to *grin and bear it*.” Merlin chuckled.

“Oh, Merlin, your jokes are *unbearable*.” Mother Goose laughed.

The couple transformed into a pair of ferocious grizzly bears and wrestled the polar bears to the ground. After a series of body slams, headlocks, and pile drivers, the polar bears gave up and tapped out of the fight.

In the opposite corner of the Great Lawn, Emerelda had a beastly challenger of her own. The Sea Witch snapped her claws, and a wall of salty water surrounded Emerelda. The witch snapped her claws again, and the wall filled with great white sharks—*Emerelda was trapped!* The Sea Witch opened her mouth, and an enormous electric eel slithered out from the back of her throat. The eel wrapped around Emerelda and shocked the fairy as it pinned her arms to her sides. The witch then pelted Emerelda with pieces of coral that grew over the fairy and confined her even more tightly.

“You won’t get away with this!” Emerelda shouted. “You can surround me with every fish in the sea, but good will always prevail over evil!”

“That’s the beauty of this world,” the Sea Witch hissed. “In the Otherworld, the evildoers can win!”

The Sea Witch clapped her claws together, and the wall of water caved in on the fairy. The water formed a sphere around Emerelda, and she couldn’t breathe. The fairy struggled against her fishy constraints but couldn’t break free. Emerelda’s eyes fluttered shut as she appeared to drown.

Before she celebrated her victory, the Sea Witch wanted to make certain

the fairy was dead. She snapped her claws again, and the coral and eel disappeared and the fairy's lifeless body rolled out of the watery sphere. As the witch leaned over her, Emerelda suddenly snapped back to life and grabbed the Sea Witch's claw. The witch's body was infected by Emerelda's touch; inch by inch, the Sea Witch was covered in an emerald glow that transformed her body into sea glass. When the transformation was complete, Emerelda blasted the Sea Witch with a bright green light and she burst into thousands of pieces, showering Central Park with tiny shards of sea glass.

The Sea Witch's sharks angrily lunged toward Emerelda, and the giant sphere of salt water rolled toward her. Before the sharks could harm the fairy, Mother Goose and Merlin pushed Emerelda out of the way and jumped inside the sphere. The couple transformed into a pair of giant squid and beat the sharks senseless.

Nearby, Violetta was having a difficult time keeping up with Serpentina's swift attacks. The witch wrapped her tongue around the fairy's ankle and dragged her through the mud. In retaliation, Violetta simply threw a small rock at the witch, but missed. Serpentina flung Violetta into the air, and the fairy landed with a heavy thud on the ground. Once again, all Violetta did to defend herself was throw another rock at the witch, and it, too, missed by almost a foot. The fairy repeated her poor defense over and over, but it only annoyed her opponent.

"Oh, come on! You're not even trying! Have sssome ssself-ressspect and fight back!" Serpentina hissed.

Violetta smiled and pointed to the sky above Serpentina. The witch looked up and saw that all the rocks were hovering above her head—but they had all grown to the size of boulders. Violetta snapped her fingers, and the boulders collapsed on top of Serpentina.

Across the lawn, Skylene was clashing with Charcoaline. A geyser of lava erupted from Charcoaline's mouth, and she aimed it toward the fairy. Skylene reached out her hands and blocked the lava with an equally powerful geyser of water. The water made a rainbow appear over the Great Lawn, not that anyone had a spare moment to enjoy it. Charcoaline used all her strength to hit Skylene with the most powerful geyser she could muster. The witch's whole body filled with lava, and it flowed through the cracks of her ashy skin.

Skylene spotted the Central Park Reservoir out of the corner of her eye and had an idea. The fairy kept her watery geyser flowing with one hand and pointed to the reservoir with the other. An enormous wave of cold water spilled out of the reservoir and drenched everyone and everything across the Great Lawn. When Skylene looked up, Charcoaline had disappeared. The fairy looked at the ground and discovered that her opponent had been cooled into a mound of singed charcoal.

Not only did Skylene's wave defeat the witch, it also dissolved all the remaining gingerbread soldiers. Conner, his friends, and the knights from Camelot cheered in victory. With the soldiers gone, Rook and Cornelius were free to approach the hill where Alex stood. The lion statues from the New York Public Library growled down at them—there was no way they were getting past Patience and Fortitude.

"Cornelius, you stay here and distract the lions," Rook said. "I'm going to sneak up the hill behind them."

Meanwhile, Jack and Goldilocks raced to the end of the Great Lawn where Rat Mary was dueling with Coral. The witch repeatedly scratched and bit the young fairy, but Coral was afraid that if she fought back, she'd injure the infant strapped to the witch's chest.

"Give us back our son, you miserable rodent!" Jack said.

"If you think I'm miserable, you should meet my friends," Rat Mary said.

The witch placed both hands on the ground and summoned all the rats and mice in Central Park. The rodents came in droves until there were thousands and thousands at Rat Mary's command. The witch pointed at Jack, Goldilocks, and Coral, and the rodents attacked. The rats and mice crawled over their bodies, scratched their faces, and chewed on their hair. Jack and Goldilocks tried to knock the vermin off with their weapons, but there were too many to keep up with.

"Hey, *Buckteeth McRabies*," Mother Goose called out. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

Rat Mary roared with laughter. "What are you going to do, *Granny*?"

Mother Goose cringed at the insult. "You know, I've been called a lot of names in my day, but you want to hear what they used to call me in Hamelin?"

"Let me guess," Rat Mary said. "Was it *Mother Time*? *Rip Van Wrinkles*?

Old Woman River? *Lady MacDeath*?"

"Not even close," Mother Goose said. "They called me *the Pied Piper*!"

Mother Goose removed a small pipe that was tucked into her bonnet. She pressed the instrument against her lips and played a charming melody. As soon as the first three notes rang out, all the rats and mice attacking Jack, Goldilocks, and Coral froze. They immediately formed a line and scurried across the Great Lawn toward the reservoir. The rodents dived into the water and never resurfaced.

Rat Mary's eyes widened with fear. She scanned the Great Lawn and discovered that the only witches left were the ones hiding behind the ovens —it was the *witches* who were outnumbered now.

"Sisters, we must leave this foul place!" Rat Mary declared. "If the fairies want the Otherworld so much, they can have it! We'll find another world to call home, but now *it's time to fly*!"

Rat Mary held out a hand, and a broomstick flew into it. The witches cowering behind the ovens quickly retrieved their own brooms.

"Lower the shield, girl!" Rat Mary shouted at Alex.

Alex did as she was told, and the force field surrounding Central Park disappeared. The witches straddled their brooms and rose into the air like a flock of crows. Rat Mary led the witches toward the New York City skyline with Hero dangling from her chest.

"HERO!" Goldilocks shouted.

Jack whistled for Lester, and the gander hurried toward him.

"Lester, we need your help!" Jack said. "Follow those witches!"

Jack and Goldilocks hopped aboard Lester's back, and the giant bird soared into the air and followed the witches toward the city.

Now that the shield was down, everyone was finally free to leave the park, but they were also vulnerable to the dangers outside it. A sniper stationed on the rooftop of a building just east of the park had been waiting all night and all morning for this moment to come.

"General, I've got a clear shot on the girl from the library," he said into his radio. "She seems to be the one generating the shield over the park. Do I have your permission to shoot before it reappears?"

"We're a little busy with monkeys and flying ships over here," the general replied. "Fire at your own discretion!"

"Target is locked," the sniper said. "Preparing to fire in three… two…

one!"

The sniper pulled the trigger, and in a split second, a bullet traveled more than a thousand feet from the rooftop and pierced the beating heart of an unsuspecting misunderstood teenager. Conner and his friends heard the gunshot echo through the park and looked up at the hill in terror.

"NOOOOOO!" Conner screamed.

The sound of her brother's panicked voice broke Alex's curse for another brief moment. She looked down at the Great Lawn and saw Conner, Bree, Froggy, Red, Cornelius, Arthur, Mother Goose, Merlin, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Fairy Council staring up with horrified expressions—but they weren't looking at her. Alex turned to her left and saw Rook standing by her side with blood dripping from a small hole in his chest.

"Alex…" he gasped. "I hope… I hope… *I hope this will make things right*."

Rook collapsed, rolled down the side of the hill, and never got up. He had gone to the hill hoping to save Alex. Tragically, his mission was even more of a success than he'd intended. Alex stared down at her friend's body in shock.

"Rook?" she said softly. *"Rook, please get up! Please get up!"*

The farmer's son didn't move, and Alex realized that her worst nightmare had come true: Someone she loved had been hurt. A tsunami of emotion rushed through her body, and the witches' curse returned. Her eyes glowed brighter than ever, her hair flickered above her head like the flames of a rocket, and power she had never possessed before surged through her veins.

Alex pointed at the sniper in the distance, and the building he stood on imploded underneath him. The man jumped and made it to a nearby rooftop only a moment before he would have plummeted to the ground.

"Alex, please, you need to calm down!" Conner yelled up at the hill. "You've got to control your emotions before they control you!"

His sister clapped her hands, and a bright spiral of light like the Milky Way Galaxy appeared above her. Alex and the lion statues disappeared inside the light, and the spiral whirled out of Central Park. With no witches to control her, the curse had transformed Alex into a destructive force without bounds—*and she was loose in New York City*.

“We need to find her at once!” Emerelda told the others. “If we can’t find a way to break the curse, Alex could destroy the city—and maybe herself in the process!”

Conner, Bree, Froggy, Red, Mother Goose, Merlin, and the Fairy Council ran out of Central Park and headed in the direction of Alex’s light. Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table knelt beside Rook’s body to pay their respects. Cornelius nudged his friend with his snout and waited for him to wake up, but Rook never opened his eyes again.

Chapter Nineteen

WAR OF THE WORLDS

While the fairies battled the witches in Central Park, General Wilson and his Marines were up against the fight of their lives. The Literary Army had the strongest, fastest, and most efficient opposition the United States soldiers had ever faced. The flying monkeys swooped in from the sky and yanked the Marines' weapons out of their hands before they even knew what was happening. The *Jolly Roger* blasted their cannons at all the Marines' Hummers and tanks, and at the rooftops where the pirates spotted snipers. Once they were virtually defenseless, the Winkies and card soldiers rounded up all the Marines in Midtown Manhattan and forced them to kneel in the middle of Fifty-Ninth Street on the edge of Central Park.

The Winkies and card soldiers surrounded the captured Marines while the *Jolly Roger* and the flying monkeys watched them from the air above. The literary soldiers only parted as the Wicked Witch, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook came to have a word with the prisoners.

"Which one of you is in charge?" the Queen of Hearts asked.

Against his sergeant's advice, General Wilson got to his feet and addressed the literary villains.

"I am," he announced. "I'm General Gunther Wilson of the United States Marines. Who the heck are you people?"

"Now, now, General," the Wicked Witch said. "That's no way to speak to your new commanders."

"The United States Marines only answer to *one* commander—and that's our commander in chief," General Wilson said.

“And where is he?” Captain Hook asked, and looked around the New York street. “He must step forward immediately and surrender the Otherworld to us!”

“*She* is in Washington, DC,” General Wilson said. “And I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you’ll *never* get close to her. You see, we’re just a fraction of the United States military; the rest of it is surrounding the city as we speak. The minute you step off this island, you’ll all be annihilated.”

The Wicked Witch, the Queen of Hearts, and Captain Hook were amused by the general’s remarks. The villains looked at one another and howled with menacing laughter.

“Then we’ll disarm them just as easily as we’ve disarmed *you*,” the Queen of Hearts said. “This isn’t the first world we’ve conquered, General, and it won’t be the last. Soon the heads of your precious military and commander in chief will be mounted on our wall!”

“But you and your men don’t have to perish in the process,” the Wicked Witch said. “You and your men could join our army and be part of our great empire.”

General Wilson took off his sunglasses so the villains could see every inch of his disgusted and impassioned scowl.

“We’d rather *die* than join the likes of you!” he shouted.

“So be it,” Captain Hook said. *“Mr. Smee, prepare the cannons!”*

The pirates aboard the *Jolly Roger* loaded the ship’s cannons and aimed them at the Marines. The general and his soldiers closed their eyes and braced themselves for a massacre.

“On my count of three!” Captain Hook ordered. “One… two…”

Suddenly, the *Dolly Llama* descended from the sky and shielded the Marines from the *Jolly Roger*’s cannons. The floating ships were so close to each other, the pirates could see the whites of one another’s eyes. Peter Pan stood beside Captain Auburn Sally and Admiral Jacobson on the upper deck.

“Oi! Codfish!” Peter Pan called down to Captain Hook. “Miss me?”

The sight of Peter Pan made Captain Hook growl like a wounded animal.

“Peeeter Paaan?” he roared. “What are you doing in the Otherworld?”

“I couldn’t let you have all the fun without me, now could I?” Peter Pan taunted him. “Leave these Marines alone, Captain. Finish your fight with

me before you pick another one."

Captain Hook glared at the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up with so much hatred, it was a miracle his face didn't catch fire.

"Smee, drop a ladder!" Captain Hook ordered.

Mr. Smee rolled a rope ladder off the side of the ship and it touched the ground. Captain Hook grabbed hold of the ladder and pointed to the *Dolly Llama* with his hook.

"After that ship!" he commanded.

Peter Pan stuck his tongue out at Captain Hook. Admiral Jacobson spun the *Dolly Llama*'s wheel, and the ship rose higher into the sky, with the *Jolly Roger* soaring after it. The flying monkeys also flew after the *Dolly Llama* to assist the *Jolly Roger*, but the creatures came to an abrupt stop when the Ziblings' colorful jet zipped into their path. The superheroes and their adoptive father waved at the monkeys from inside the cockpit.

"Attention, Hominidae-Accipitridae hybrids," Professor Wallet said through the aircraft's speaker. "Resist your animalistic urges and spare yourselves from a cataclysmic fate!"

The flying monkeys scratched their heads and looked at one another in confusion. The Ziblings rolled their eyes at the professor's terminology, and Bolt took the microphone from him.

"In translation: *Just 'cause monkey see, don't mean monkey should do*," Bolt said. "Ditch the flying ship and come with us! We'll make it worth your while!"

Morph transformed into a pile of bananas to tease the monkeys. The winged creatures were tempted to go after the Ziblings' jet, but they glanced down at the Wicked Witch for permission first.

"Tear that flying chunk of metal apart!" the Wicked Witch ordered them.

Since the flying monkeys were under the witch's spell, they had no choice but to obey her. The winged creatures hurtled after the Ziblings' jet with their claws raised and their sharp teeth exposed. The superheroes yanked on their aircraft's gears, and the jet zoomed into the clouds.

"I DARE SAY, MERRY MEN," shouted a boisterous voice. "WHAT SORT OF SELF-RESPECTING MAN REFERS TO HIMSELF AS A *WINKIE*?"

The Wicked Witch looked down Fifty-Ninth Street and saw Robin

Hood, Little John, Alan-a-Dale, Will Scarlet, and Friar Tuck standing at Columbus Circle. The circle was a New York City landmark and had a tall statue of Christopher Columbus in the center of a roundabout connecting Fifty-Ninth Street to Broadway.

"WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT HIDEOUS WOMAN THE WINKIES TAKE ORDERS FROM," Robin Hood said. "DO YOU KNOW WHAT WE IN LOXLEY CALL A WOMAN WITH ONE EYE, TERRIBLE CLOTHES, AND A HAGGARD FACE?"

"I don't know, Robin," Little John said. "What do you call her?"

"SINGLE!" the Prince of Thieves declared.

The Merry Men burst into a fit of haughty laughter. The Wicked Witch grunted at the insult, and steam piped out of her ears.

"After those arrogant men!" she ordered.

Also under the witch's spell, the Winkie soldiers immediately sprinted down the street and dashed after the Prince of Thieves. The Wicked Witch sat sidesaddle on her magic umbrella and flew above her soldiers. Robin Hood and the Merry Men hightailed it out of Columbus Circle and ran north on Broadway, leading their followers to another part of the city.

As the Queen of Hearts watched the Wicked Witch and the Winkies race off, a stiff hand unexpectedly tapped her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" asked a voice behind her. "Would you happen to know how to get to Grand Central Station from here?"

The Queen of Hearts turned around and discovered the Tin Woodman standing behind her. The queen had never seen a man made of metal before, and a delighted squeal escaped her lips. She stepped toward the metal man with eyes like a predator.

"My word, what a remarkably rare *head* you have," she said, and stroked the side of his face. "It would be a wonderful addition to my collection."

"Come again?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"GUARDS, SEIZE THIS MAN AT ONCE!" the Queen of Hearts shouted. *"AND OFF WITH HIS HEAD!"*

"And *this* is why you don't ask for directions in strange cities," the Tin Woodman said to himself.

The Ozian ran from the deranged queen as fast as his tin legs would carry him. He took a sharp turn on Fifth Avenue, heading south into the

city, and the card soldiers hurried after him. The Queen of Hearts snapped her fingers, and two of her soldiers joined hands, scooped her up, and carried her with them as they chased after the Tin Woodman.

Unbeknownst to the Literary Army, they had just been strategically lured away by Conner's friends and characters—and the villains had taken the bait like a hungry school of fish. Now that the *Jolly Roger* was flying after the *Dolly Llama*, the flying monkeys were following the Ziblings, the Winkies were running after the Merry Men, and the card soldiers were chasing the Tin Woodman, the general and the Marines were left completely unattended on Fifty-Ninth Street.

The Marines looked around the street in total bewilderment—how had they gone from facing certain execution to freedom so quickly?

"Sir, what just happened?" a Marine asked.

"That was called *luck*, Sergeant," General Wilson responded. "Let's not press it any further."

"Your orders, sir?" asked another Marine.

"Evacuate Manhattan immediately," General Wilson said. "And someone get the president on the phone at once. We need authorization to wipe out these barbarians before they disperse."

"Sir, what does that mean?"

"I'm saying we are at DEFCON-2, Sergeant," the general barked. "We need to vaporize this island while those savages are still on it. In less than an hour, New York City will only exist in our memories."

The *Dolly Llama* snaked between the city's buildings with the *Jolly Roger* hot on its tail. The pirates fired their cannons at one another, but the ships floated so freely, it was difficult to hit their targets. Cannonballs slammed into the high-rises they sailed past, leaving a trail of shattered glass, broken antennas, and busted corporate logos throughout Midtown Manhattan.

"Enough cat-and-mouse games," Captain Auburn Sally announced. "It's time to confront these scallywags face-to-face!"

The *Dolly Llama* set sail for the Empire State Building, then made a dramatic turn. Admiral Jacobson tied down the ship's helm, and the *Dolly Llama* began circling the Empire State Building. The *Jolly Roger* mimicked the maneuver and also revolved around the building.

Captain Auburn Sally and her crew swung onto the observation deck while Admiral Jacobson and his fleet manned the cannons. Captain Hook and his men joined the women on the observation deck, leaving Mr. Smee to operate all the *Jolly Roger*'s cannons on his own. The men of the *Jolly Roger* and the women of the *Dolly Llama* formed lines at opposite ends of the observation deck and drew their weapons.

"Men like you give pirates a bad name," Captain Auburn Sally said.

"You aren't *pirates*," Captain Hook said with a laugh. "You're just a bunch of little girls with attitude!"

"Then I feel sorry for you, Hook," Auburn Sally said. "Because you and your men are about to get your booty handed to you by a bunch of little girls. *Ladies, charge!*"

The pirates from Starboardia and the pirates from Neverland clashed in a swashbuckling spectacle eighty-six stories above the ground. Cannonballs flew above their heads as the circling ships sparred in the air. The sounds of clanking swords and firing cannons echoed in the streets of New York City.

The crew of the *Dolly Llama* were gifted swordswomen, but they also used some of their signature moves to battle the men of the *Jolly Roger*. Winking Wendy made her opponents sick by flashing the empty socket under her eye patch. Fish-Lips Lucy gave her adversaries painful hickeys when they least expected it. Somersault Sydney tumbled across the observation deck and knocked down the men in her path like they were bowling pins. Stinky-Feet Phoebe held her smelly feet against her challengers' faces until the fumes made them lose consciousness. Too-Much-Rum Ronda broke empty bottles of rum over the pirates' heads—and after a long week at the Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital commissary, Ronda had *a lot* of empty bottles.

While the pirates battled on top of the Empire State Building, Peter Pan covertly flew over to the *Jolly Roger*. He quietly searched all the ship's decks for Tinker Bell, but the fairy was nowhere to be found.

"Looking for *this*, Peter?" Captain Hook called to him.

Peter Pan jerked his head toward the sound of Hook's voice. The captain

was standing on the edge of the observation deck with a jar dangling from his hook, and Peter saw Tinker Bell trapped inside it.

"Give her back!" Peter Pan shouted.

"If you want her, come and get her!" Captain Hook yelled.

Peter Pan removed the dagger from his boot and met Captain Hook on the edge of the observation deck. The literary characters fought each other with more intensity than ever before. The more they fought, the higher they climbed, and soon they were dueling on the roof of the observation deck. Captain Hook climbed a ladder up the side of the building's spire while Peter hovered in the air beside him—all while blocking deadly blows from the other's weapon. Finally, the captain reached the very top of the building's spire and couldn't climb any higher.

"Hand over the fairy," Peter Pan demanded.

The captain couldn't tell if Peter was deliberately taunting him, but he still cringed at the word *hand*.

"Do you know what I wish I could do more than anything else in the world, Peter?" Captain Hook asked.

"Clap?" Peter Pan guessed.

"What?" the captain asked. *"No!"*

"Do a handstand?"

"NO!"

"Play the piano?"

"STOP IT! STOP MAKING APPENDAGE JOKES!"

"Why? Is it getting out of *hand*?"

"YOU ARE SO IMMATURE!"

"Captain, now is not the time to *point the finger*."

Peter Pan was beside himself with laughter. Captain Hook growled angrily and got back to his point.

"More than anything, I want to see you lose something you love," the captain said. "But since it's impossible to hold you down and cut off *your hand*, I've decided to hit you where it hurts the most. You want Tinker Bell back? *Catch!*"

Captain Hook threw Tinker Bell's jar into the air, and it plummeted toward the streets below. Peter Pan dived after the jar—and as he passed the *Jolly Roger*, Mr. Smee fired a cannon at him. Instead of a cannonball, though, a wide net erupted from the cannon and wrapped itself around

Peter. The boy landed on the roof of the observation deck and was too firmly tangled in the net to save Tinker Bell.

"TINK!" Peter Pan screamed.

The Rosary Chicken hadn't moved from the deck of the *Dolly Llama* since the battle began, but as she watched the helpless fairy fall to her death, the chicken knew this was her moment to contribute. The Rosary Chicken plunged toward the jar, but just as she clutched the jar's handle with her beak, the chicken suddenly remembered *she couldn't fly!*

"*SQUUUUAW!*" the Rosary Chicken squawked as she fell toward her own certain death.

Fortunately, her desperate chirps were heard by another one of Conner's characters. At the top of the *Dolly Llama*'s mast, the Blissworm emerged from its cocoon to save its friend. However, the Blissworm didn't exit its chrysalis as a smiling, squishy space worm. Instead, a massive creature slipped out of the cocoon and landed on the deck of the *Dolly Llama* with a loud thud. The creature had bulging biceps, defined abdominal muscles, three feathered antennas, and a wide set of wings whose pattern, when they stretched open, resembled a sad face. The Blissworm had evolved into the next phase of its metamorphosis: a ferocious Mad Moth.

The Mad Moth got to its feet, roared like a Tyrannosaurus rex, and beat on its broad chest like a gorilla. The creature was such a fascinating sight, all the pirates on the Empire State Building stopped fighting to watch it—some even took a seat. The Mad Moth leaped off the *Dolly Llama*, using the entire ship as a diving board, and whooshed toward Tinker Bell and the Rosary Chicken. The Mad Moth caught up to the chicken and the fairy within a few feet of the street below.

"SQUAAAAAAAAAAAAAW!"

The Rosary Chicken was more afraid of the Mad Moth than the fall. The massive insect returned to the *Dolly Llama* and gently placed the chicken and Tinker Bell's jar on the deck. Peter Pan and the characters from Starboardia cheered the Mad Moth's bold rescue. It was so impressive, even a few of the *Jolly Roger* pirates clapped along.

"NOOOOOO!" Captain Hook yelled. *"He was supposed to lose something he loved!"*

The livid captain slid down the Empire State Building's spire and landed beside Peter Pan on the roof of the observation deck. The boy was still

trapped in the net and couldn't move. Captain Hook raised his sword over Peter's head, preparing to strike him with a final, fatal blow. Right before the captain would have slain the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up, Auburn Sally somersaulted across the roof and sliced off Captain Hook's remaining hand. The captain's sword (and his hand) fell to the ground.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" Captain Hook roared in agony.

Strangely, instead of blood gushing from the captain's veins, the only thing that came out was *words*. All the adjectives that James M. Barrie used to describe the horrible Captain Hook spewed from the captain's severed wrist.

Captain Hook tucked his wounded arm into his shoulder and lost his balance. He fell over the railing of the observation deck and plunged toward the ground. The captain hit the street with such a powerful thump that the entire block rattled. When the pirates looked down, instead of seeing the captain's body, they saw more of James M. Barrie's words splattered across the pavement. The words slowly sizzled into smoke and disappeared.

After witnessing their captain's fall to his death, the *Jolly Roger* pirates raised their hands in surrender. Peter Pan was cut free from the net and was happily reunited with Tinker Bell. Not-So-Jolly Joan burst into tears and blew her nose in Peg-Leg Peggy's shoulder.

"What's wrong, Joan?" Peg-Leg Peggy asked.

"Oh, it's nothing." Not-So-Jolly Joan sniffled. "I just love a happy ending."

The Ziblings' jet zipped through the sky above New York City, but no matter how inconsistently they piloted the aircraft, the superheroes couldn't lose the flying monkeys trailing them. Blubo joined the swarm of winged creatures as they soared after the jet, but not because he was under the Wicked Witch's spell. The little monkey was looking for his family and spotted his parents at the front of the flock.

"Mom! Dad! It's me—it's Blubo!" he shouted.

"Blubo!" his mother cried. "What are you doing here?"

“You were supposed to stay at the witch’s castle in Oz!” his father said.

Despite the concerned expressions on their faces, Blubo’s parents never slowed down to greet their son or even turned to see him. Like all the other monkeys, they kept their eyes fixed on the Ziblings’ jet.

“I met some friends who are going to stop the Wicked Witch!” Blubo told them. “Those superheroes are with us—they’re good guys! You’ve got to stop chasing them before someone gets hurt!”

“I wish we could, son,” his father said. “As long as the Wicked Witch is wearing the golden cap, the monkeys are under her control.”

“I know, but can’t you fight the spell?” Blubo asked.

“We’ve tried, sweetheart, but it’s no use,” his mother said. “The Wicked Witch’s magic is too powerful. You should get out of here and enjoy your life while you still can. Once you get older, you’ll be under the witch’s control, too.”

Despite his parents’ advice, Blubo wasn’t ready to give up just yet. The little monkey left the flock and glided toward the city on a daring mission to save himself, his parents, and his species.

Eventually, the flying monkeys caught up with the Ziblings’ jet. The creatures landed on the aircraft’s wings and began ripping it apart panel by panel. A loud alarm sounded inside the cockpit to warn the passengers.

“That’s not good,” Professor Wallet said. “Those chimps are going to make us crash if we don’t intervene!”

“Don’t worry, Dad, we’ll take care of it!” Bolt said. “You stay inside and steer; we’ll go outside and save the jet before this flight goes *bananas*. Get it? Because they’re *monkeys*.”

Blaze, Whipney, and Morph sighed at their little brother’s joke.

“You’ve really got to work on those one-liners, Bolt,” Whipney said.

“Yeah, it’s kind of crucial if you want to be remembered,” Blaze said.

“But more importantly *merchandized*,” Morph said.

The Ziblings crawled out of a hatch at the top of the cockpit to handle the flying monkeys outside. The aircraft was speeding at hundreds of miles per hour, and Blaze, Whipney, Morph, and Bolt had to hold on tightly to the edge of the wings so they didn’t fly off.

Blaze hit the flying monkeys with fiery blasts from the tips of his fingers. Whipney whipped the winged creatures off the jet with her long braids of hair. Morph transformed into a giant octopus and knocked the

monkeys off the aircraft with his enormous limbs. Bolt zapped the monkeys with bursts of electricity, but since they were all clinging to a metal object, every time he missed, he accidentally electrocuted his brothers and sister.

"BOLT!" they yelled in unison.

"Sorry—my bad!" he apologized.

Soon there were so many flying monkeys covering the jet, the aircraft looked like a large black bird flying through the air. One of the monkeys ripped off a panel and found a bundle of wires underneath it. The monkey sliced the wires with its teeth, and the jet's engines stopped working. The Ziblings' jet suddenly dropped from the sky and plunged toward the streets below.

"Hold on tight, children!" Professor Wallet's voice called from the speakers. *"It's going to be a bumpy landing!"*

Their mission complete, the flying monkeys abandoned the wings of the jet. Morph transformed into a giant parachute to ease the approaching impact, but the jet was too heavy. The Ziblings' jet smashed through the roof of a Broadway theater and nose-dived into the orchestra pit. The rough landing knocked the wind out of the superheroes, and they slid down the aircraft and rolled onto the theater's stage. Professor Wallet crawled out from a mountain of airbags and rested beside his children.

Bolt looked around the theater as he caught his breath. "It could have been worse," he said. "We could have landed *Off-Broadway*."

The smallest superhero snickered at his own joke, and to his surprise, his brothers and sister laughed, too.

"Much better," Blaze said.

"Now, that's a good line," Morph agreed.

"See, it just takes practice," Whipney said.

Suddenly, high-pitched screeching echoed inside the theater. The Ziblings looked through the fresh hole in the roof and saw that the flying monkeys were headed toward the theater—*they weren't finished with the superheroes yet*. The other Ziblings were still catching their breath, so Bolt leaped to his feet and flew toward the ceiling.

"I'll be right back," Bolt said. "I've got some *monkey business* to take care of!"

His brothers and sister groaned.

"Annnnnd you lost me," Blaze said.

“Less is more,” Morph said.

“Should have stopped at *Off-Broadway*,” Whipney said.

Bolt rocketed out of the theater and soared right past the flying monkeys. Just the way a bird protects her nest from a predator, the distraction worked, and the monkeys followed Bolt instead.

The superhero flew east and spotted the Chrysler Building in the distance. The sparkling skyscraper gave Bolt an idea. He landed at the very tip of the building’s sharp spire, and the winged creatures landed below him. The monkeys charged up the sides of the building toward the little superhero, intending to tear him apart like the Ziblings’ jet.

Bolt waited until all the flying monkeys were on the Chrysler Building’s metal-coated roof; then he looked up at the clouds and summoned a powerful bolt of lightning from the sky. The lightning hit the spire and sent a wave of electricity through the building. The extreme voltage made every lightbulb burst, every window shatter, and it electrocuted all the flying monkeys. The winged creatures were zapped so hard they looked like balls of fur with wings. The monkeys fluttered to the ground and passed out as soon as they hit the street.

“Well, that’ll put a *monkey wrench* in their day!” Bolt chuckled.

The little superhero was so proud of himself for defeating the flying monkeys, he didn’t even need his siblings to approve his one-liner. He threw his head back and laughed until his belly hurt.

The Winkies and the Wicked Witch followed Robin Hood and the Merry Men up Broadway to Lincoln Center. The center was home to five large theaters that sat around a spacious courtyard with a large fountain in the center. Robin Hood and the Merry Men sprinted up the steps of the courtyard, and although there were plenty of places to run, they stopped at the edge of the fountain. The Winkies quickly filled the courtyard and surrounded the Merry Men with their weapons raised.

“You morons give up so easily,” the Wicked Witch remarked.

“DO YOU HEAR THAT SHRILL SOUND, MERRY MEN?” Robin

Hood asked. “THE WITCH’S VOICE IS EVEN UGLIER THAN HER FACE, AND I DIDN’T THINK THAT WAS POSSIBLE.”

“Silence!” the Wicked Witch commanded.

“I MEAN, LOOK AT HER,” Robin continued. “THE WITCH IS SO UGLY, WHEN SHE WAS BORN, THE DOCTOR PROBABLY SLAPPED HER TWICE BECAUSE HE DIDN’T KNOW WHICH END WAS WHICH.”

“All right, that’s enough—”

“THE WITCH IS SO UGLY, SHE WENT TO A FUNERAL AND THE CORPSE GOT UP AND RAN AWAY!”

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll—”

“THE WITCH IS SO UGLY, SHE WAS VOTED THE NATIONAL ANIMAL OF SCOTLAND!”

The Wicked Witch tapped her umbrella on the ground, and a dirty sock appeared in Robin Hood’s mouth.

“I’m going to enjoy watching you die!” the witch declared. “Winkies, kill this pompous man *and* his imbecile followers! And do it *slowly*….”

The Winkies lunged toward Robin Hood and his Merry Men, but before they could strike the Prince of Thieves, they were distracted by a large object overhead. The *Charlie Chaplin* rose over Lincoln Center like an inflatable sun. Beau Rogers stood in the doorway of the blimp’s gondola wearing the Lost Talisman of Pharaoh Eczema around his neck.

“You aren’t the only one who’s into mind control, milady,” Beau Rogers announced. “Allow me to introduce you to *my* batch of brainwashed warriors!”

All the mummies from the Pyramid of Anesthesia crept out from behind the structures of Lincoln Center and surrounded the Wicked Witch and her Winkies.

“My soldiers have already met their maker—*now it’s your turn!*” Beau said.

“Nice quip, kid!” Emgee called from the blimp’s steering wheel.

“Thanks, Aunt Emgee,” he said. *“Mummies, attack!”*

The undead soldiers approached the Winkies at a leisurely pace—which was as fast as the mummies could move. Unfortunately for Beau and the Merry Men, their surprise assault didn’t go as well as they’d hoped. The Winkies were exceptional fighters and tore through the mummies like they

were made of cotton. Within a few minutes, the Winkies had defeated the mummies and trapped Robin Hood and the Merry Men again.

The Wicked Witch let out a deafening cackle. "Any last words?" she asked.

"WELL, MERRY MEN, IT LOOKS LIKE THIS IS THE END," Robin Hood declared. "I NEVER THOUGHT WE'D PERISH AT THE HANDS OF SOLDIERS WITH SUCH RIDICULOUS NAMES AND MORE FLAMBOYANT CLOTHING THAN OUR OWN. NONETHELESS, IT'S BEEN AN HONOR TO TRAVEL THE UNIVERSE AT YOUR SIDE!"

"Um… Robin?" Alan-a-Dale whispered. "You're forgetting the next part of our plan."

"OH YEAH," Robin Hood said. "THANK YOU, MY FAITHFUL MINSTREL. WE WOULD HAVE MET OUR DEMISE HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR YOUR STEEL TRAP OF A MEMORY. MOVING ON—*LOST BOYS, YOUR TIME HAS COME!*"

Suddenly, the Lost Boys from Neverland appeared on the rooftops of the Lincoln Center theaters and pelted the Wicked Witch with water balloons.

"Take *that*, you mean old hag!" Tootles said.

"Adults like you are the reason we don't want to grow up!" Curly said.

"Go back to the nightmare you came out of!" Nibs said.

"Leave our friends alone!" the Lost twins said.

Although Slightly had been a baby since the Lost Boys visited Morina's cottage, he still did his part and squirted the witch with his bottle. Soon the Wicked Witch was drenched, and she began to smoke and sizzle as the liquid melted her body. Just as it had happened with Captain Hook, instead of bodily fluids, the witch dissolved into *words*. All the prose L. Frank Baum used to describe the Wicked Witch in his books now dripped from the witch's body.

"You horrid little brats!" the Wicked Witch screamed in pain. *"You'll pay for this one day! You may have stopped me in the Otherworld, but I'll get my revenge in the Underworld!"*

The witch staggered across the Lincoln Center courtyard, leaving puddles of words as she went. She tripped and fell headfirst into the fountain and disintegrated completely. Friar Tuck knelt beside the fountain and said a prayer for the salvation of her soul.

Now that the Wicked Witch of the West was dead, her vicious spell over

the Winkies was lifted. They dropped their weapons and pranced around the courtyard in celebration. Alan-a-Dale strummed a happy tune so that they had something to dance to.

"WHAT'S GOING ON?" Robin Hood asked. "WHY ARE THE WINKIES SKIPPING AROUND LIKE THEY'RE INTOXICATED?"

"Robin, they've been freed!" Beau Rogers called down to him. "The witch has been controlling them for years!"

"YOU MEAN, THE WITCH FORCED YOU TO WEAR THOSE OBNOXIOUS OUTFITS AND ANSWER TO THAT DEGRADING NAME?"

"No, we had those before the witch's spell," a Winkie said.

Robin was greatly disturbed to hear it. "MIGHT THERE BE *ANOTHER* WITCH INVOLVED?" he asked.

Suddenly, Blubo swooped down from the sky and landed on the edge of the fountain. He dived in and searched through the Wicked Witch's watery remains. The others were curious about what the monkey was doing and gathered around the fountain to watch him.

"I found it!" he announced.

Blubo resurfaced with the Wicked Witch's golden cap in his hands. He threw it on the ground and then smashed it with one of the Winkies' spears until it broke into hundreds of pieces.

"There!" Blubo said with a satisfied smile. "From this moment forward, no one will ever control the flying monkeys again!"

The Winkies cheered for the monkeys' newfound freedom. Although the Merry Men, the Lost Boys, and the archaeologists had no idea what Blubo was talking about, they joined the characters from Oz as they danced around Lincoln Center in celebration.

"SUCH A STRANGE PLACE, THIS *OZ*," Robin Hood declared. "IT'S NOT EVERY DAY YOU CONVERSE WITH WITCHES, MONKEYS, AND *WINKIES*. ACTUALLY, IT REMINDS ME OF A WEEKEND I HAD IN FRANCE."

The card soldiers and the Queen of Hearts followed the Tin Woodman from Midtown all the way to Washington Square Park in Lower Manhattan. The park was famous for the towering arch that stood at its north entrance. The Tin Woodman hurried through the arch, expecting to see the park filled with the Cyborgs from "Galaxy Queen," but the Cyborgs were late.

"Oh dear," the Tin Woodman said.

The card soldiers caught up with the Tin Woodman and formed a circle around him. They pointed the sharp ends of their staffs at the metal man, and he dropped his axe. The Queen of Hearts sauntered into the circle and strutted around the Tin Woodman, eyeing him like he was a delicious treat.

"Hold him down," she ordered with a devilish smile. *"I want to cut off his head myself!"*

The soldiers grabbed the Tin Woodman by the arms, kicked his legs out from underneath him, and forced him into a kneeling position. The Queen of Hearts picked up his axe and practiced swinging it.

"So *you're* the one they call the Queen of Hearts?" the Tin Woodman asked.

"That's correct," the queen said.

"But I don't understand," he said. "You invade other people's homes and claim them as your own. You cut off people's heads for sport. How can you be *the Queen of Hearts* when you act so *heartless*?"

"Is your head hollow?" the queen asked with a snort. "Every creature in existence has a heart—it's just a muscle that pumps blood through the rest of your body. What you're talking about is *compassion*—it's much rarer and a total waste of time, if you ask me."

The Tin Woodman's eyes darted back and forth as he tried to make sense of it all.

"So, what I've been searching for this whole time, *I've actually had inside me all along*?" he asked. His jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide as he made the greatest discovery of his life.

The Queen of Hearts shared a confused glance with her card soldiers—was the man she was about to decapitate asking *her* about life lessons?

"I'm told that that is a conclusion most people come to before the end of their life," she said. "Lucky for you, you've reached it just in time. Now hold your head steady—*this is going to hurt*."

His realization made the Tin Woodman feel like he was seeing the world

for the first time. He was so overwhelmed, tears filled his eyes—but he couldn't get emotional and rust. He needed to save himself from the Queen of Hearts so his new life could begin.

"Wait!" the Tin Woodman said. "If you're so fascinated by my head, you should see my *heart*."

"Stupid man," the queen said. "You just said you didn't have one—now you want me to look at it?"

"I was mistaken," he said. "You may be the Queen of Hearts, but I guarantee you've never seen a heart like *mine* before."

The Tin Woodman had captured the queen's attention, and she raised a curious eyebrow.

"Very well, before I cut off your head, I'll have a look at your heart," she said. *"Turn him over!"*

The card soldiers pulled the Tin Woodman up and turned him on his back. The Queen of Hearts leaned over his metal torso and yanked open the small door in his chest. To her horror, the queen didn't find a heart at all, *but a tiny little woman standing inside him!*

"BOOOOO!" Trollbella screamed.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHH!" the Queen of Hearts screamed.

The queen was so stunned, she dropped the Tin Woodman's axe and stumbled backward. The soldiers pinning the Tin Woodman quickly went to help the queen. Trollbella jumped to the ground, retrieved the axe, and tossed it to the Tin Woodman once he was on his feet. The Queen of Hearts roared with anger and pointed her finger at the unlikely duo.

"SEIZE THEM AT ONCE!" she yelled. *"AND OFF WITH BOTH THEIR HEEAAA—"*

Before the Queen of Hearts could finish her sentence, the Tin Woodman swung his axe with all his might and chopped the queen's head off. Again, just as with the other literary villains, the only thing that spewed out of her body was *words*. All the adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns Lewis Carroll used to describe the unpleasant monarch sprayed out of the queen's neck. Eventually, the words dried up and the Queen of Hearts' dismembered body disappeared.

"He's murdered our queen!" a card soldier shouted.

"He'll pay for this!" shouted another.

The card soldiers charged toward the Tin Woodman and Trollbella, but

just as they were about to be pierced by the soldiers' weapons, everyone in the park was suddenly distracted by a bright light in the sky. The Tin Woodman and Trollbella looked up and saw that the *BASK-8* had finally arrived!

The Cyborg Queen and Commander Newters observed the park from the window of the Command Bridge.

"I believe *this* is the park we've been looking for, Your Majesty," Commander Newters said. "Oh yes, this is definitely Washington Square Park, I can see it's filled with the boxy soldiers we agreed to defeat."

"This city has more *square parks* than all my planets combined," the Cyborg Queen said. "Anyhoo, I can see we're a little tardy. Send the Cyborgs to assist the metallic lumberjack and his vertically challenged friend."

"Yes, ma'am," Commander Newters said, and turned to the Cyborg soldiers. "You heard the queen—*to the park!*"

A wide door opened across the *Bask-8*'s belly, and thousands of Cyborgs glided into Washington Square Park. They descended using jetpacks, Hoverboards, and personal propellers. Before engaging in combat, the Cyborgs' first order of business was to transport the Tin Woodman and Trollbella to the top of the Washington Square Arch. Once they were safe, the Cyborgs wreaked havoc on the card soldiers.

The Wonderland natives were skilled fighters, but they were no match for the Cyborgs' laser guns, gamma bombs, and rocket launchers. It wasn't long before the cards surrendered and were taken aboard the *BASK-8* as the Cyborgs' prisoners.

As the battle ended, the Tin Woodman sat on the edge of the tall arch and let out a big sigh.

"What's wrong?" Trollbella asked.

"I've always been hollow, but for the first time in my life I feel truly *empty inside*," the Tin Woodman said. "I always thought a heart would fill the void, but now that I know I've had one all along, I'm not sure what to do with myself."

The Tin Woodman's dilemma was Trollbella's dream come true. She stared in wonder at the most beautiful sight she had ever seen: *an emotionally mature, vulnerable, and needy man*. The Troblin Queen had a seat beside the Tin Woodman and longingly gazed up at him, batting her

eyes.

"You know, I fit perfectly inside your chest," she remarked. "Perhaps *I'm* the heart you've been searching for."

Trollbella put her tiny hand into his and rested her horns on his shoulder. In that moment the Tin Woodman was certain he had a heart, because the troll girl's touch made him blush.

Rat Mary and the witches flew through New York City as erratically as possible, but nothing threw off their determined followers. Lester, Jack, and Goldilocks soared after the witches as they dangerously zigzagged between buildings, looped around skyscrapers, and dived under bridges. Absolutely nothing was going to stop the daring parents from retrieving their son.

Lester was gaining more and more ground with each passing second. Soon they were in reaching distance of the bristles on the last witch's broom.

"I've got an idea," Jack told his wife and the gander. "We'll follow the witches to that cluster of buildings in the distance, but when we get there, we'll go around that green tower and cut them off before they reach the—"

Before Jack could finish unripping his plan, Goldilocks sprang into action with a plan of her own. She leaped off Lester's back and landed on the broomstick of the closest witch. Goldilocks fought the witch for control of the broom. Just as the witch was about to zap her with a magic spell, Goldilocks punched the witch in the face, and she landed in the East River.

Goldilocks gripped the broomstick tightly with both hands. She had never ridden on a witch's broom before, and it took her a moment to figure out how to work it. She was pleasantly surprised to learn that riding a magic broomstick was very similar to riding a horse. When she leaned forward, the broom zoomed ahead, and when she pulled up on the handle, the broom slowed down. Once she felt confident, she turned to Jack and Lester flying beside her and filled them in on her plan.

"I'm going to work my way to the front of the witches," she told them. "Then I'm going to hop aboard Rat Mary's broom and get Hero."

“Be careful, Goldie!” Jack said.

“Careful never got me anywhere,” she said with a wink.

The courageous mother leaned forward, and the broomstick’s speed gradually increased. As she flew past the witches, Goldilocks did whatever she could to knock them out of the sky. She slammed into them and shoved them off their brooms, she pulled the witches’ hair so they’d fall backward into the city, and she kicked their brooms’ handles and sent them spinning out of control. Finally, the only ones left in the flying procession were Goldilocks, Rat Mary, and Hero.

Goldilocks snuck up right behind Rat Mary’s broom, then jumped off her own and landed beside the witch.

“Give me back my son!” she demanded.

“Why do breeders get so attached to their young?” Rat Mary screeched. *“You can just make another one, you know!”*

The witch twisted and looped through the air, she dipped and made sharp turns, she even flew upside down at one point—but nothing knocked Goldilocks off the broom. The vigorous movement only rocked Hero to sleep.

“Gosh, you’re relentless!” Rat Mary said. *“Here! Just take the little rug rat! I’ll find another one!”*

The witch sliced the strap of the BabyBjörn with her sharp fingernail. The contraption slid off the witch’s body and fell toward the ground with Hero inside it. Goldilocks dived off Rat Mary’s broomstick and caught her son in midair. The mother and child fell thousands of feet through the air. A few seconds before they would have hit the ground, Lester swooped under them and they landed safely in Jack’s arms.

“Curses!” Rat Mary said. “I was hoping for a splat!”

Ironically, the witch wasn’t watching where she was going and slammed headfirst into the Flatiron Building. The messy impact made one thing abundantly clear: Rat Mary’s kid-snatching, broom-riding, potion-brewing days were over.

Jack and Goldilocks were overjoyed to finally have Hero back in their arms. The happy couple embraced their newborn son, and Lester carried the reunited family back toward Central Park to find their friends.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TIMES SQUARE SQUARE-OFF

The spiraling light whirled out of Central Park and transported Alex and the lion statues to Times Square. They landed on the rooftop just below the Times Square Ball that drops every New Year's Eve. The world-famous intersection was completely empty, but all the flashing lights, the illuminated billboards, and the giant video screens had been left on during the evacuation.

Alex sat on the edge of the roof and sobbed over the death of her friend. The curse made her emotions skyrocket, but she was consumed by much more than grief. Her head filled with thoughts of *guilt*. *It was her fault the witches had invaded the Otherworld. She was to blame for all the damage and fear they had caused. If it weren't for her, Rook would still be alive.*

As Alex tormented herself, she subconsciously caused vines and ivy to grow up the buildings around Times Square. Soon the entire square was covered in plants. Eventually Conner, his friends, and the Fairy Council stumbled into the square. Thanks to all the vegetation, they knew they were in the right place.

"I see her!" Conner announced. "She's up there under the New Year's Eve ball!"

The lion statues leaped off the roof and landed on the ground. The impact was so strong, Times Square rattled and the lions left paw prints in the pavement. Just as they had done at the library, the lions guarded the building and wouldn't let anyone get close.

"Alex, I know you're experiencing unimaginable pain right now, but it's

very important you listen to us," Emerelda called up to the roof. "The curse you're under stems from a very powerful and very evil magic mirror. It's making you think things that aren't true, feel emotions that aren't real, and it's disturbing your point of view. As difficult as it is, you can't trust *anything* your body or mind is telling you. The magic only has one purpose: *to destroy everything its host holds dear*. If you let it deceive you, all will be lost."

"But it's all my fault!" Alex cried. "If I'd found my uncle Lloyd sooner, none of this would have happened! If I had stopped the witches in the fairy-tale world, they never would have come to the Otherworld! And if I had just forgiven Rook, he wouldn't have felt the need to prove himself and save me!"

"Alex, none of that is true, because *I'm* the one to blame," Emerelda confessed. "You knew the Masked Man was dangerous and you did everything you could to stop him. *I'm* the one who didn't believe you. *I'm* the one who demanded you call off the search. *I'm* the one who thought you were being irrational instead of recognizing the signs of a curse. And because of *my* mistakes, *I* wasn't there to help the kingdoms when the Literary Army attacked, *I* wasn't there to stop the witches from traveling to the Otherworld, and *I'm* the reason Rook is dead. I take full responsibility for everything that's happened, and now I need your help to fix it. So please, come down from there and we can fight the curse together!"

Emerelda seemed to ease Alex's suffering, but only slightly. Alex searched deep inside her soul and found the strength to block out all the terrible thoughts and feelings the curse inspired. She dried her tears and mustered the courage to join her friends and family below.

"Not so fast!"

Morina walked out from around a corner and stood between the lion statues. As soon as the witch's presence was known, Alex lost all self-control and the curse took over completely, returning her to Morina's command.

"Why can't you people just *stay* where I leave you?" Morina asked.

"Let my sister go, Morina!" Conner demanded.

"Sorry, but no can do," the witch said. "I've got big plans for your sister, but sadly, you'll just have to take my word for it—none of you will be alive by the time we're through."

“Haven’t you caused enough damage?” Emerelda asked.

“Actually, I’ve just begun,” the witch said. “Alex, hold down your friends so we can finish what we started.”

Alex nodded and waved her hand over Times Square. Vines shot out of the ground near the Fairy Council’s feet and pinned them to the pavement. Long electric cables shot out of the giant video screens and wrapped around Conner, Bree, Red, and Froggy, then held them against billboards and banners above the streets. The lion statues leaped into the air and tackled Mother Goose and Merlin to the ground.

“Good girl,” Morina said. “Now I want you to destroy everything and everyone in this miserable world, starting with New York City.”

Alex nodded again and levitated into the sky high above Times Square. She summoned more vines to grow across the island, working their way through one neighborhood at a time. The plants wrapped around buildings, trees, cars, streetlamps, and mailboxes, crushing everything in their path like a tsunami of hungry anacondas.

“Since your plan didn’t work, you’re gonna take it out on the whole world—is that right?” Conner asked.

“In a nutshell, yes,” Morina said with a sinister smile. However, the witch’s smile vanished when she discovered Froggy pinned to a billboard above her. *“Charlie!”* she shouted. “How did you escape the magic mirror?”

“I performed a *good deed*,” Froggy said. “That’s a selfless act one commits for the benefit of someone else, in case you’re wondering.”

“Impossible!” she declared. “No one can leave a magic mirror once they’re trapped inside it! That was the whole point of imprisoning you in one!”

“That’s odd, because I can name *three* people who’ve been freed,” Froggy said. “Perhaps if you were better informed, you might actually *accomplish* one of the atrocious plans you set forward.”

Morina glared at the frog man. “There’ll be no returning from where I send you next,” she said. “That I *promise* you.”

The witch raised an open hand toward Froggy and then clenched it into a tight fist. The gesture caused the cables around Froggy’s body to squeeze and choke him. The sight of Morina torturing Froggy made Red’s blood boil. When the witch wasn’t looking, the young queen managed to free her

left hand. She reached into her purse and retrieved the Swiss Army knife she'd bought at the airport. She quickly cut herself free and landed on the ground.

"Leave the frog alone, you goat!" she yelled.

The witch turned around and was very amused to find Red challenging her.

"Well, if this isn't the most pathetic thing I've ever seen," Morina said. "Do you actually think *you* can stop *me*?"

"Underestimate me all you want," Red said. "It's much easier than facing the truth, isn't it, Morina?"

"And what truth is that?" the witch asked.

"How sensationally *jealous* you are of me!" Red declared.

Morina howled with laughter. Conner and the others eyed one another nervously—they had no idea where Red was going with this.

"You think I'm *jealous*? Of *you*?" the witch asked.

"So far you've ruined my wedding, cursed one of my best friends, and trapped my fiancé in a magic mirror, and now you're strangling him in front of me," Red said. "If that isn't a personal vendetta, I don't know what is. Obviously *something* is fueling your obsession with ruining my life, and it doesn't reek of *jelly* on my side of the ballroom!"

"Please explain how someone like *me* could be jealous of someone like *you*," Morina said. "I've gutted canaries with higher intelligence."

"Like most aspects of my life, brains have nothing to do with it," Red said. "Face it, you're envious of my beauty!"

"Excuse me?" the witch asked.

"You heard me!" Red said. "I have flawless skin, beautiful eyes, fantastic hair, a naturally high metabolism—but I'm also *kind, considerate, giving*, and a *good friend*! I'm just as gorgeous on the inside as I am on the outside! And no matter how many potions you drink, no matter how many enchantments you make, there will always be a selfish, greedy, hateful, and *ugly* goat inside you!"

The queen's words hit the witch right where it hurt the most. Morina was so outraged, her eyes turned red and the blood in her veins became black. Red's friends and the Fairy Council closed their eyes, terrified to see how the witch would respond.

"You really are the biggest idiot in the universe," Morina said. "I

consider *this* a favor to mankind."

The witch pointed with both hands at Red, and a bright violet light blasted from the tips of her fingers. Just as the deadly blast was about to hit the young queen, Red removed the hand mirror from her purse and used it to shield herself. Morina's magic bounced off the mirror and headed straight back to her. Morina was hit by her own magic and burst into millions of pieces.

"Who's the idiot now, *Morina*?" Red said.

When Conner and the others opened their eyes, they were shocked to see that Red was still standing and the witch was dead.

"Darling, that was incredible!" Froggy cheered.

"Red, you're a genius!" Conner shouted.

"How did you know the mirror would reflect her magic?" Bree asked.

"Glamorous Magazine," Red said with a shrug. "I read this wonderful article on the plane that said *'If a woman wants to be saved, she'll find her greatest savior in the mirror.'* I don't know who they were talking about, but they certainly saved me."

Her friends had never been so thankful for a misinterpretation. Red climbed a ladder and cut Froggy loose from the billboard with the Swiss Army knife. They helped each other to the ground, but before Froggy could help the others, Red stopped him.

"Charlie, I want to get married," she said.

"Well, so do I, darling—"

"No, you don't understand," she said. "I want to get married *right now*."

Froggy knew from the desperate look in her eyes that Red was dead serious.

"Sweetheart, are you sure *now* is a good time?" he said.

"I'm positive," Red said. "If the last month has taught me anything, it's how unpredictable life can be—especially when you're friends with the Bailey twins. This could very well be the last chance we'll ever get! Let's do it now, in the Square of Times, before another magical being can tear us apart!"

The idea made Froggy's heart fill with joy, but he wasn't convinced it was the right thing to do.

"Are you sure this is the wedding you want?" he asked. "I don't mean to be crude, but the whole street is covered in a witch's remains."

A large and self-assured smile grew on Red's face. "Charlie, I can't think of a better place to get married than on the ashes of your ex-girlfriend," she said. "Mother Goose, will you do the honors?"

Besides being pinned to the ground by a three-ton lion statue, Mother Goose couldn't think of a reason why she couldn't perform the ceremony.

"I suppose I'm available," she said.

"Wonderful!" Red squealed. "And for all intents and purposes, we'll say the Fairy Council are our witnesses, Conner is the best man, and Alex is my maid of honor. *Don't worry, Alex! This will only take a minute and we'll get right back to helping you!*"

Red and Froggy joined hands and stood in the middle of Times Square as Mother Goose officiated the impromptu wedding.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today—against our will—to unexpectedly watch this frog and woman join in questionable matrimony. Do you, Charlie Charming, take Red Riding Hood as your lovably high-maintenance wife?"

"I do," Froggy declared.

"And do you, Red Riding Hood, take Charlie Charming as your adorably webfooted husband?"

"I do," Red said.

"Then it is with the power mistrusted in me that I now pronounce you husband and wife! You may kiss the frog!"

Red and Froggy shared their first kiss as a married couple, and their friends cheered.

"Beautiful ceremony, my dear," Merlin said.

"Believe it or not, this isn't the strangest wedding I've been to," Mother Goose said. "Now will someone get this stone feline off me?"

Fortunately, they didn't have to. Alex soared across Manhattan as her magic consumed the island below her. The lion statues leaped off Mother Goose and Merlin and followed Alex, jumping from rooftop to rooftop across the city. Froggy and Red cut the cables around Conner and Bree and then sliced through the vines trapping the Fairy Council.

"What do we do now?" Bree asked.

"We need to get off this island and regroup with the others," Conner said. "Now that she's been ordered to destroy the Otherworld, Alex isn't going to stop until we break the curse."

“Any ideas how to break it?” Froggy asked.
“Just *one*,” Conner said. “But I’m praying we find another way.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A BROTHER'S BURDEN

A wave of Alex's destructive vines chased after Conner, his friends, and the Fairy Council as they ran through the New York City streets. The fairies zapped the approaching plants with enchantments to keep them off their tail, but every time they destroyed one vine, a dozen grew in its place.

"It's like Manhattan is sinking into the Thornbush Pit!" Conner said.

"What's a Thornbush Pit?" Bree asked.

"It's a dangerous sinkhole in the fairy-tale world," Conner explained. "Alex and I had to go inside it to retrieve an item for the Wishing Spell. You know what's funny? After all this, *that* seems like a *good memory*!"

"Speak for yourself!" Froggy said.

Luckily, the group came to an intersection and crossed paths with Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and Cornelius. They, too, were on the run from the atrocious vines covering the city. The unicorn carried Rook's body on his back; the knights had covered him in candy wrappers from the witches' base.

"Did you find Alex?" Arthur asked.

"We did," Red said. "As you can see from the demonic plants covering the city, *it didn't go so well*."

"A witch ordered Alex to destroy the world, starting with the city," Conner said. "We're trying to get off the island so we can come up with a plan to stop her!"

Eventually, they reached the Hudson River on the west side of Manhattan. Merlin transformed a pigeon into a small ferry and everyone

quickly boarded it and sailed down the river toward Liberty Island. Conner was virtually speechless as he watched Alex's magic consume the city beside them. His sister had come a long way from the bookworm in Mrs. Peters's sixth-grade classroom.

The ferry docked on Liberty Island, and Conner reunited with his friends and characters from the Saint Andrew's Children's Hospital commissary. Charlotte and Bob were overjoyed to see that Conner and his friends were safe. They charged through the crowds on the island and gave him a huge hug.

All the pirates, superheroes, archaeologists, and Cyborgs appeared to be in great spirits given the circumstances, but their demeanors quickly changed when they noticed the body on Cornelius's back.

"What happened?" Bolt asked.

"Rook saved Alex's life," Conner informed them. "He stepped in front of a sniper's bullet before it hit her."

"My God," Bob said. "His poor father."

"Where is your sister now?" Charlotte asked.

"She's currently destroying the biggest city in the United States," Conner said. "You know, typical teenage stuff."

His mother let out a frustrated sigh. "Is there *nothing* we can do to stop the curse?"

"Nothing worth mentioning," Conner said.

Lester swooped toward Liberty Island with Jack, Goldilocks, and Hero on his back. Everyone was relieved to see that the parents had rescued their child from the witches, and Jack and Goldilocks were thankful that their friends had gotten out of the city in time.

"There you are!" Jack said. "We circled the park but couldn't find a place to land—the whole city is covered in vines!"

"Tell me about it," Conner said. "What happened to all the witches?"

"We took care of most of them, but a few might have escaped the city," Goldilocks said. "Any luck with Alex?"

Conner shook his head. "I wish I had better news."

"I do—*Froggy and I got married!*" Red announced. "Oh, and I also killed Morina with a hand mirror. I know an afternoon of *murder and matrimony* sounds awfully tacky, but it was quite lovely."

Froggy looked down at Jack and Goldilocks's newborn son, and a wide

smile stretched across his face. “This must be Hero,” he said.

“I keep forgetting you haven’t met him yet,” Goldilocks said. “Hero, this is your uncle Froggy.”

She passed the infant into Froggy’s arms. Froggy’s eyes became extra glossy at the sight of his nephew. Hero stared up at Froggy like he was the most fascinating thing he had ever seen.

“He’s beautiful,” Froggy said.

“You should have seen what he looked like when he came out,” Red whispered. “I didn’t eat for days.”

While the two were being introduced, Conner was shocked to see that the majority of the Literary Army was scattered across Liberty Island. The card soldiers from Wonderland and the pirates from Neverland sat on the ground in handcuffs. The Winkies guarded the prisoners, and although Conner couldn’t put his finger on it, there was something very different about them—like the light had returned to their eyes. The flying monkeys were twitching, covered with static electricity, and lay across the grass virtually comatose—but Conner noticed a difference in them, too. He saw that Blubo was snuggled up in his parents’ laps, happily picking the bugs off their bodies.

“Wait a second—did you guys defeat the *entire* Literary Army without us?” Conner asked with an excited smile.

“We sure did!” Peter Pan announced. “The *Dolly Llama*’s crew and I fought Captain Hook and his pirates on top of the Empire State Building! Auburn Sally sliced off his hand and the captain fell to his death!”

The Mad Moth roared like a Triceratops to remind Peter of its involvement, which startled everyone on Liberty Island.

“Oh, and the Blissworm hatched from its cocoon and saved Tinker Bell!” Peter added.

“*That’s* the Blissworm?” Bree asked. “Boy, and I thought *my* imagination was warped.”

“What else happened while we were in the park?” Conner asked.

“Bolt electrocuted the flying monkeys on the Chrysler Building!” Blaze bragged about his brother.

“The Merry Men and the Lost Boys defeated the Wicked Witch at Lincoln Center,” Beau Rogers said. “And once she was dead, the Winkies and monkeys were free from her magic spell!”

“I’VE MADE MANY WOMEN MELT IN MY DAY, BUT SHE WAS THE FIRST ONE TO ACTUALLY *DISSOLVE*,” Robin Hood said.

“The Tin Woodman beheaded the Queen of Hearts in Washington Square Park, and our Cyborgs captured her card soldiers,” Commander Newters said.

Bree couldn’t help noticing that Trollbella and the Tin Woodman were holding hands. “What’s going on with *you* two?” she asked. “Are you guys like a *thing*?”

“If we *must* define our relationship in your uncivilized monster terms, then *yes*, we are a thing,” Trollbella said. “I’ve spent my whole life longing after Butterboy, but it turns out what I really needed was a *Butter Tray*.”

Conner was bursting with so much pride for all that his friends and characters had accomplished, he didn’t have room to be disturbed by Trollbella and the Tin Woodman’s new relationship.

“But who told you *how* to defeat the Literary Army?” he asked. “I mean, even I would have had to consult a librarian.”

“Your mom did,” Bolt said.

Conner was pleasantly surprised to hear it. *“Really?”*

“At first we didn’t know what to do, either,” Charlotte said. “Then I thought, *What would Alex and Conner do if they were in my shoes?* So I took a page from your book and *wrote a story* about meeting James M. Barrie, L. Frank Baum, and Lewis Carroll. I splashed the pages with a few drops of Portal Potion, stepped into the beam of light, and asked the authors how to defeat their characters.”

“And what did they say?”

“Sir James M. Barrie said Captain Hook’s greatest weakness was *revenge* and that he’d never give up a chance to get even with Peter Pan for cutting off his hand. Mr. Baum said the Wicked Witch of the West was so evil she could be melted by water, so it’s nice to know the movie depicted something correctly. Lastly, Mr. Carroll said the Queen of Hearts would never pass up an opportunity to chop off a unique head. I relayed all the information to Arthur and he put the plans into motion.”

Over the years, Charlotte had given Conner plenty of reasons to be a proud son, but hearing how she’d acquired the information necessary to defeat an entire army definitely took the cake. However, before Conner could shower his mom with praise, he suddenly froze and went dead silent

—her methods had given him an idea.

"Oh my gosh," he said. "I know how to break the curse! *I know how to save my sister!*"

Conner instantly had everyone's attention. Even Hero was interested in what he had come up with. But before Conner shared his plan, he ran to the edge of Liberty Island and looked across the river at the Manhattan skyline. Most of the island was covered in his sister's vines, but Alex herself was nowhere in sight.

"I need a better view of the city," Conner said. "Lester, could you give me a lift to Lady Liberty's torch?"

The giant gander leaned down so Conner could climb on his back. Bree's curiosity got the best of her and she hopped aboard Lester, too. They flew to the very top of the Statue of Liberty, and Lester dropped the teenagers off on Lady Liberty's torch.

"So?" Bree asked. "How are you going to break the curse?"

Conner shrugged. "Oh, I have no idea."

"Then what's your secret plan?" she asked.

"I'm going to ask someone who does have an idea," he said. "But first, I need to know *exactly* where Alex is—otherwise the plan isn't going to work."

They scanned the city like it was an ancient text. Finally, they spotted Alex drifting through the buildings of downtown Manhattan. She flew to the top of the Freedom Tower and watched her vines spreading through the streets below. The lion statues climbed the sides of the towering skyscraper and joined her.

"Great, she's landed!" Conner said. "If we can just get her away from those statues, I might have a shot at saving her!"

Suddenly, something moving in the Hudson River caught their attention. A small boat painted in camouflage colors was speeding up the river. The boat docked on Liberty Island, and they watched as General Wilson, a dozen Marines, and a very familiar old woman climbed onto the island.

"Cornelia?" Bree said in disbelief. "But what the heck is she doing here?"

Conner and Bree quickly climbed aboard Lester, and the gander transported them back to the ground. By the time they arrived, all the characters had gathered around Cornelia, the general, and his Marines.

“I’m here on urgent business, so everyone listen carefully,” General Wilson said. “I don’t know who you people are, where you’re from, or why you’re in my country, but you all need to return home immediately.”

“Seriously, Gunther?” Cornelia berated him. “Do you really expect people to respect you when you address them like that? Not all of us are Marines, you know.”

The general did his best to ignore her remarks, but everyone could tell they were getting under his skin.

“In less than an hour, the United States military will be dropping a nuclear weapon on the city of New York,” he announced. “Unless you want to be caught in its detonation range, you must leave this island at once.”

“What?” Charlotte gasped.

“You can’t nuke the city!” Conner yelled. “My sister’s still over there!”

“I’m sorry for your loss, but the decision has been made,” General Wilson said.

“This is *exactly* what I warned you about, Gunther!” Cornelia said. “Had you just listened to me when I first told you about the portals to other dimensions, none of this would be happening right now!”

The general’s nostrils flared. “Cornelia, I invited you here to help me communicate with these people, not reprimand me in front of them!”

“You *invited* me here?” she asked. “Forty armed guards showed up at my house in the middle of the night, pulled me out of bed, and threw me into the back of a jeep! If that’s your definition of an *invitation*, I’d hate to see how you *arrest* someone!”

“Cornelia, how do you and the general know each other?” Bree asked.

“We used to date,” Cornelia explained. “I spent years trying to warn him about the portal between worlds, but no matter how much interdimensional evidence I gathered, he never took the Sisters Grimm seriously. And now here we are, minutes away from destroying the greatest city in the world!”

“This is not the time to say *I told you so*,” the general barked.

“I don’t need to say it,” Cornelia snapped. “It’s abundantly clear!”

“Okay, time out!” Conner shouted. “Obviously you two have issues that never got resolved, but can we go back to the part about *nuking New York City*? That can’t be the only option!”

General Wilson pointed across the river to the vines demolishing the buildings throughout downtown. “We have to stop *that* from spreading to

the rest of the world," he said. "Unless you've got a better idea, the army will be dropping a nuke in thirty-five minutes."

Conner glanced at his sister on top of the Freedom Tower. His plan to free Alex from the curse would be the most difficult mission of his life, but he would rather die trying to save her than do nothing and watch her perish.

"Actually, I *do* have a better idea," he said. "Who's got a pen?"

The Freedom Tower was the tallest building in Manhattan and provided Alex with a breathtaking view of the city as she destroyed it. At the very top of the building, wrapped around the base of the antenna, was the Communication Platform Ring. The three-level platform was filled with radio equipment, giant lights, wires, and hundreds of support beams. Alex and the lion statues walked around the platform as they watched the vines consume the Big Apple below them.

Suddenly, the Mad Moth whooshed out of the sky and knocked both lion statues to another rooftop nearby. The massive insect roared like a banshee and pounded the statues into smithereens. The Mad Moth gobbled up the small chunks of stone before they could rematerialize into the lions. A thunderous burp erupted from the alien's mouth, causing the windows of a neighboring building to shatter.

Unbeknownst to Alex, while she watched the Mad Moth devour her stone guardians, Lester had snuck onto the roof behind her and dropped off eight passengers. Alex heard their footsteps as they spread out on the platform, but when she turned around, there was no one in sight. Alex briskly walked through the levels of the platform and searched for the intruders.

"I've spent the last thirty-eight hours wondering how to help you," Conner called out from his hiding spot. "I've thought of spells, potions, charms, enchantments—but none of them were powerful enough to break the curse. Then I remembered that when we were kids nothing helped you forget your troubles more than a good story. So I wrote you one—here it goes."

Conner stepped out from behind a support beam, and Alex hit her brother with a bright burst of light. It knocked him unconscious, and Conner collapsed on the platform. Seeing her brother injured, even by her own hand, broke the curse temporarily, and Alex returned to normal.

"Conner!" she yelled.

She hurried to her brother's side. When she arrived, she discovered that this wasn't actually her brother—it was *Arthur*! The young king had been transformed to *look* like Conner! Once Alex realized she had been tricked, the curse returned tenfold. The real Conner cleared his throat from wherever he was hiding and began his story.

"Once upon a time, there was a little girl. She was very smart and loved to learn more than anything else in the world. The little girl was the best student at her school and surpassed her classmates in every subject they studied. Unfortunately, the other students became jealous of the little girl and were intimidated by her. Instead of praising her intelligence, the children teased and bullied her for being so smart. They wouldn't play with her on the playground or eat lunch with her in the cafeteria, and the little girl became very lonely."

Alex saw her brother running across the third level of the platform. She zapped him with another burst of light and he collapsed. However, when she went to check on him, she found Jack lying on the floor instead.

"Whenever the little girl felt sad, she would read a new book from the library. The characters in the stories became her friends, inspiring the little girl to read as much as she could. The more she read, the smarter the little girl became. And the smarter she became, the more people resented her for it."

Conner appeared on the bottom level of the platform. He leaped over the railing and landed on the level above. Alex blasted her brother with a beam of light and discovered that he was actually Froggy. This time the curse didn't even break so she could check on him—it knew the game Conner was playing.

"By the time the little girl was a young woman, she was the leader of a faraway kingdom. The young woman's passion for knowledge made her a very wise ruler, and the mistreatment she experienced as a child made her sympathetic to her people's needs. Unfortunately, the young woman's superior leadership intimidated the adults in her life. They became envious

of her abilities and made her life difficult whenever they could."

Conner popped up from behind a satellite dish. Alex struck her brother with another burst of light and Charlotte collapsed on the floor.

"Since there always seemed to be consequences for the young woman's *good qualities*, she gravely feared the consequences of a *bad quality*. So the young woman held herself to an unhealthy level of perfectionism and never allowed herself to make a mistake. It was hard enough being resented without reason—she couldn't imagine how difficult the world would be if she gave it a reason to hate her."

Alex saw Conner skipping across the platform above her. She hit him with a ray of light and Red rolled onto the roof.

"One day the adults in the young woman's life created a plan to exploit her abilities for themselves. They put a terrible curse on her that caused the young woman to feel and do awful things at their command. Even though she was being forced against her will, the young woman was such a perfectionist, she blamed *herself* for every terrible act she committed. She was so ashamed, she asked a loved one to take her life, believing it was the only way to end her suffering."

Conner suddenly peeked out from behind the Freedom Tower's antenna. Alex hit her brother with a powerful ray of light and he transformed into Cornelius.

"But it wasn't the young woman's fault for thinking this way. You see, no one ever told her it was okay to make mistakes. No one told her there was nothing wrong with needing help. No one told her it was normal to feel upset, or angry, or overwhelmed now and then. Everyone in her life took her perfectionism for granted and didn't realize how suffocating it was. And because no one gave the young woman permission to be *human*, she thought she was a failure for being one."

Alex spotted Conner doing a handstand on a radio antenna. She hit him with another blast of light and Emerelda tumbled to the floor.

"*You* are that young woman, Alex! People have made you feel bad for being *accomplished*, and now that you're cursed, it feels like it's the end of the world! You're so used to being in control, you think you've disappointed everyone by being vulnerable to something *you can't control*! But the only thing that would ever disappoint us is if *you gave up fighting*! So I won't let this curse be the end of you! I know you can save yourself

from it if you just *cut yourself some slack*!"

Suddenly, her brother's binder of short stories slid between Alex's feet. The real Conner jumped out from hiding and wrapped his arms around her.

"But if I can't convince you, I know someone who will!"

Conner dropped the flask of Portal Potion and it shattered across the binder's pages. A beam of light shot up and the Bailey twins disappeared into the most important story Conner had ever written….

Chapter Twenty-Two

A SPECULATION STORY

The twins entered the bright and endless world of the Portal Potion. The story Conner had written was so short that it didn't take long for his handwriting to take shape and form the world he'd created. He'd written the story so quickly, there hadn't been time to include much detail. All that materialized in the empty space around them was a very familiar white door.

Alex's eyes stopped glowing, her hair stopped floating above her head, and she looked around the story in a daze.

"I… I… I feel *normal*," she said. "Conner, you broke the curse! How did you make it go away?"

"Unfortunately, it's not over yet," Conner explained. "You're still cursed—it just can't affect you in this story. I wrote about a world where curses don't exist."

"It's nice to have a clear head again—even if it's only temporary," Alex said. "If we don't find a way to break the curse, I should just stay here. What kind of story is this?"

It was difficult for Conner to describe it. "It's sort of a speculation piece," he said. "I wrote a story about what our lives might be like if… *well*, if we'd never had a reason to move out of our old house."

His sister's eyes grew wide when she realized what he was implying.

"You mean…" she said, but couldn't finish her thought.

Conner sighed. "Maybe," he said. "Let's go inside and find out."

The twins went through the white door and stepped into the living room

of their old house. At first glance the room was *exactly* the way they remembered it, but as they walked farther into the house, they noticed a few subtle changes. All the photos in the picture frames had been changed to current ones of their family. There were pictures of birthday parties, family vacations, holiday trips, and embarrassing school portraits. Even though the twins were present in each photo, Alex and Conner didn't remember *any* of the memories on display.

"It's like an alternate reality," Alex said. "Look, this school picture is me in the ninth grade—but I was already living in the fairy-tale world by then."

"Maybe we never discovered the Land of Stories," Conner said. "If we had stayed in this house, maybe Grandma wouldn't have had a *reason* to give us her storybook—if you know what I mean."

Alex absolutely knew what her brother meant and nodded. Suddenly, the sound of clanking pots and pans came from the next room—the twins weren't alone. They walked down the hall and peered into the kitchen, and both froze in the doorway when they laid eyes on the person making the noise.

"Daddy," Alex gasped.

It wasn't until she said the word that Alex realized how long it had been since she had last said it. The twins' father, John Bailey, was standing just a few feet away from them behind the kitchen counter. He wore an apron covered in flour and was in the middle of mixing ingredients in a large bowl. The twins noticed that their father was slightly older than their memory of him; his hair had started to gray around his temples and his crow's-feet were more pronounced than they used to be.

"Hi, guys!" their father said. "You're just in time. I know we promised your mom we'd try eating less sugar, but I left work with the *biggest* craving for chocolate chip cookies. I'm going to need help eating them before she gets home."

He looked at his children with a smile they hadn't seen in four years. Seeing their father again made Alex so happy, she cried harder than she had ever cried in her life. The tears of joy washed away all the specks of magic dust in her eyes, the warmth in her heart disintegrated all the magic dust in her lungs, and every trace of the witches' curse was erased from her body. Their father had barely said a word and had already done exactly what Conner had hoped he would. Even though it was only a story, Conner

couldn't help becoming emotional himself. The person he had missed every day since he was eleven years old was standing right in front of him—how could he *not* be moved to tears?

John was very surprised to see the tears running down their faces. He wiped his hands on a washcloth and stepped out from behind the kitchen counter to take a closer look at them.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked. "Did something happen at school today?"

"No," Conner answered. "We just *really* missed you—that's all."

"It's so good to see you again." Alex sniffled.

The twins gave their father the biggest hug physically possible and cried some more into his shoulders. John eyed the twins suspiciously. Even in Conner's fictional world, John knew his children better than anyone.

"Are you *sure* everything's okay?" he asked. "I'd love to hear what's on your minds."

"Well, Alex had a rough day," Conner said. "Some girls at school were really cruel to her. They made her feel bad and do some stuff she regrets. And even though it wasn't her fault, she won't stop blaming herself for what happened."

"Oh, really?" John asked. "Well, if it wasn't your fault, why is it troubling you so much?"

Alex shrugged. "Even though I didn't intentionally hurt anyone, people still got hurt *because* of me. I didn't know I was capable of so much damage. It's changed how I look at myself."

John dried his daughter's tears with the edge of his apron.

"Well, the good news is it's never too late to rewrite your own story," he said. "If you feel like something is wrong, there's always a chance to make things right, no matter who's to blame. But you should never feel responsible for other people's choices. That's too big a burden for anyone to carry."

"I know," Alex said. "I just always want to be doing my best—I hate looking back and feeling like I could have done better."

"But, sweetheart, that's how we grow," John said with a laugh. "What makes you think you have to be so perfect?"

"I suppose it goes back to the stories you used to read us," Alex said. "You raised us to believe that if someone is kind, generous, and responsible,

they'll have a *happily ever after*. So ever since I was a kid, I tried my hardest to be one of those people. I thought being perfect was the only way I could guarantee a happy ending.

"But now that I'm older, I realize life isn't a fairy tale. And no matter how much work you put into it, *happily ever after* doesn't exist."

Of all the things his daughter had said so far, this concerned John the most. He took Alex by the hands, sat her at the kitchen table, and had a seat beside her.

"Sweetheart, happily ever after *does* exist, it's just not what you think," he said. "*Happily ever after* isn't a solution to life's problems or a guarantee that life will be easy; it's *a promise* we make ourselves to always live our best lives, despite whatever circumstance comes our way. When we focus on joy in times of heartbreak, when we choose to laugh on the days it's hard to smile, and when we count our blessings over our losses—*that's* what a true *happily ever after* is all about. You don't get there by being perfect; on the contrary, it's our humanity that guides us. And that's what fairy tales have been trying to teach us all along."

"But what about death?" Conner asked. "How do you keep living a *happily ever after* when you lose someone you love?"

"Now *you're* troubled over something you can't control," John said. "The only power we have over death is how we choose to define it. Personally, when someone *dies*, I don't believe they cease to exist. The people we love the most will always be alive, thanks to the stories we tell and the memories we share. As long as we keep our loved ones in our hearts, their pulse will continue to beat through our own."

The twins knew their father was telling them the truth. If death was the end to a soul's existence, then how could he be sitting in front of them giving this advice? Conner barely had time to write the setting of the story—his father's words of wisdom weren't coming from *his* imagination.

"Well, I hope that was helpful," John said. "Are there any other questions I can answer for you?"

There were millions of questions Alex and Conner wanted to ask him. However, instead of taking the moment to ask him anything, the twins were both compelled to tell him something.

"I just want to say I love you, Daddy," Alex said. "With all my heart."

"Me too, Dad," Conner said. "And always will."

John was very amused by his teenagers' loving behavior, but the sentiments touched his heart nonetheless.

"I love you guys, too," he said. "And don't worry, I'll always be right here, whenever you need me."

A soft rumble came from another part of the house. The twins didn't recognize it at first but eventually remembered it was the sound of the garage door opening.

"I guess your mom got off work early," John said. "We are so busted! Quick, help me put away the cookie dough before she comes inside!"

Their father quickly got to his feet and ran back behind the kitchen counter. Strangely, the rumbling of the garage door never stopped. It became louder and louder, and soon the whole house was vibrating strongly. Object by object, the twins' former home turned back into the words in Conner's story.

"What's happening?" Alex asked.

"The story must be over," Conner said. "I've never seen it do this before, but I've never written something so short, either! We've got to get out of here!"

"I don't want to leave," Alex said.

"If we don't get out of here, we'll end with the story," Conner warned her. "It's a rule of the Portal Potion!"

Conner grabbed Alex's hand and pulled his sister out of her chair. Only after their father dematerialized into Conner's handwriting did Alex let him pull her away. The twins raced through the sitting room and out the front door and dived through the beam of light emitted by Conner's story. The twins landed back on the roof of the Freedom Tower, and the beam shining out of Conner's binder disappeared.

"Well, *that* was an emotional roller coaster," Conner said. "How do you feel?"

Alex was surprised by her answer. "Actually, I feel pretty good," she said. "I think a few moments with Dad was exactly what I needed. Thanks for coming to my rescue, Conner. You really are the best brother in the world."

"I know," Conner teased. "But you were worth the trouble."

The twins helped each other to their feet and walked to the edge of the roof. Now that the curse was broken, the magical vines had stopped

destroying the city. Manhattan was covered in so many plants, the city looked like an enormous green grid.

"Wow," Alex said. "Did I really do *all this*?"

"Well, it certainly isn't my mess," Conner said.

"I barely remember any of it," she said. "I can't imagine how upset all the New Yorkers must be."

"Before you start writing apology notes, we should think of a way to clean it up," her brother said. "Everyone in the world is going to know about the fairy-tale world after this."

Alex sighed. "Gosh, I wish there were a way to just put everyone to sleep and erase their memories," she said. "It'd sure help me deal with all the guilt."

"Well, why not?" Conner said. "It's kind of brilliant, actually."

"Do you really think it's possible?" Alex asked him.

For the first time in more than a week, Conner laughed. "Alex, you just destroyed New York City in your sleep," he said. "I think you're capable of doing *anything* you set your mind to."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A PRESIDENTIAL SURPRISE

In the residential suite at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, President Katherine Walker awoke in the middle of the night from a bizarre nightmare. She had dreamed that New York City was under attack by an army of fictional characters. The invasion became so extreme that she was forced to order the evacuation, and eventually the annihilation, of the greatest city in the world. The president sighed with relief when she realized it had only been a dream, but there was something incredibly unsettling about how *real* the dream felt.

President Walker decided to take a walk to calm her thoughts. She quietly climbed out of bed, careful not to wake the First Gentleman, and snuck out of the residential suite. The president wandered through the long halls of the White House in her slippers and bathrobe, but it was hard to take her mind off all the disturbing images she'd seen in the dream.

Also concerning was how *empty* 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue seemed. She was used to seeing the Secret Service and staff strolling through the halls at all hours of the night, but for reasons unknown to her, the White House was completely empty.

"Hello?" she called out. "Is someone there?"

All the president heard was the echo of her own voice. She searched the library, the State Dining Room, the Diplomatic Reception Room, and even the China Room, but she didn't find a soul. Finally, she heard people whispering and followed the sound all the way into the West Wing.

The voices appeared to be coming from inside the Oval Office, so the

president gently cracked open the door and peeked inside. She saw a pretty young woman seated on the sofa and a curious young man inspecting the president's desk.

"Conner, what are you doing?" the young woman said.

"I'm looking for the red button," he said.

"What red button?"

"You know, *the president's red button*!" the young man said, like it was obvious. "The one they're always talking about in the movies that launches all the nuclear weapons."

"*Why?* Are you going to push it?" the young woman asked.

"Of course not, I just want to see—"

The young man froze when he spotted the president standing in the doorway. The young woman jumped to her feet and bowed awkwardly. The young man ran out from behind the desk and stood by her side.

"What are you doing in here?" the president demanded.

"Madam President, it is such an honor to meet you," the young woman said. "My name's Alex Bailey, and this is my brother, Conner."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," Conner said. "Our parents didn't vote for you, but it's still *super-cool*!"

The president eyed the twins up and down, especially Alex.

"Wait a moment, I recognize you," the president said. "You were the girl destroying New York City in my dream!"

"Actually, it wasn't a dream," Alex said. "But for the record, I was under a terrible curse and wasn't behaving like myself. But I've completely recovered, so you have nothing to fear. Normally, I'm quite a lovely, precocious, and well-mannered person. Actually, I've always thought you and I could be friends."

As friendly as the twins seemed, the president wasn't in the state of mind to *make friends*.

"Are you telling me that an army of fictional characters attacked New York City *in real life*?" she asked.

"You know, there's literally no easy way to put it, so I'm just going to say *yes*," Conner said. "But the army is gone, New York City is safe, and the whole world is asleep right now—so there's nothing to worry about."

According to the look on the president's face, she begged to differ.

"What do you mean, *the whole world is asleep*?" she asked. "Will one of

you please explain what's going on?"

"Madam President, you might want to have a seat first," Alex suggested. "There's a lot we need to fill you in on."

President Walker took Alex's advice and had a seat on the sofa across from them. Once she was seated, Alex and Conner sat down, too, and did their best to explain.

"As you probably know by now, *this* isn't the only world," Alex said. "There's another dimension very similar to this one. We refer to it as the Land of Stories because it's the home of all the fairy-tale characters we love; unfortunately, it's also home to all the characters we *don't*. Recently, a portal between the worlds opened, and the villains of the fairy-tale world emerged and tried to conquer this one."

"Once we defeated the army, Alex put the entire planet to sleep while we cleaned up all the damage they made," Conner said. "You were sleeping for a lot longer than you think."

"How long was I asleep?" the president asked.

"Two hundred years," Conner said. "Everyone you know and love is dead."

"What?"

Conner slapped his knee and burst into laughter. Alex shot him a dirty look.

"I'm just kidding, you've only been out for a week," he said. "Sorry, I've had a really serious month, so I'm getting my jokes out where I can. The good news is New York is completely back to normal—well, as normal as it was before."

"How did you rebuild an entire city in just a week?" President Walker asked.

"With the flames of an albino dragon," Alex said like it was obvious. "It's a magic fire that restores and heals everything it touches."

"It's also great for getting stains out of your clothes," Conner said.

"We covered Manhattan in the flames, and once the city was reassembled, we transferred all the sleeping New Yorkers back to their homes—that part took the longest," Alex said. "Then we erased the entire New York incident from everyone's memory. The whole world will wake up tomorrow morning and go back to their regular lives like none of it ever happened."

“If everything is taken care of, why bother telling me? Why not erase my memory as well?” the president asked.

“Because we need your help,” Alex said. “Unfortunately, during the battle a few witches escaped. We thought the majority of them were dead, but when we rebuilt the city, their remains were gone. A secret society known as the Sisters Grimm has agreed to track down the witches. Here’s a list of their names, contact information, and the government clearances they’ll need in order to start.”

Alex handed over a thick stack of papers, and the president gave the documents a quick scan.

“Who are the Book Huggers?” she asked.

“Oh, they’re the Sisters Grimm’s newest recruits,” Conner said. “The Book Huggers asked us to use their alias instead of their real names. They said the government would frame them if we disclosed their identities—*you’d understand if you met them*.”

“There’s one more thing,” Alex said. “I did everything I could to close it, but the bridge between worlds is here to stay. However, I managed to move the bridge from the New York Public Library into the pages of *this book*.”

Alex handed the president a thick storybook with a magenta cover. The title was written in gold: *The Land of Stories: Volume Two*.

“You have to keep the book shut or the bridge will reappear,” she explained. “We figured it was probably best to leave it with the president of the United States instead of leaving it lying around our mom’s house. You have to keep it somewhere safe and quiet so it doesn’t end up in the wrong hands.”

“Put it next to the flying saucer from Roswell,” Conner said with a wink.

“Why are you trusting the United States with this?” President Walker asked. “I can keep this book as safe and quiet as I want, but if the next president has a different agenda, I won’t be able to stop them.”

“We can cross that bridge when we get to it,” Alex said. “Due to a strange phenomenon, our worlds have collided, and I don’t think something that significant happens by accident. So rather than fighting against it with more secrecy, maybe it’s time we come together? Who knows, it might be what the worlds have been planning from the beginning.”

“And why should I trust you?” the president said. “You say the curse is

over, but how do I know the two of you aren't a danger to national security?"

Alex and Conner looked at each other, and both burst out laughing.

"Madam President, we are *absolutely* a danger to national security," Conner said. "But luckily for you, we've got each other to check and balance."

"No matter how far we stumble from the path, we always guide each other back to it," Alex said. "So you can always count on us to do the right thing."

President Walker closed her eyes and rubbed her face. This meeting was providing a lot more information to digest than her usual appointments.

"I appreciate your coming here, but I'm going to need to discuss this with the Joint Chiefs of Staff before I can fully commit the United States to such a—"

When the president opened her eyes, the Bailey twins were gone. She looked around the Oval Office, but they had vanished into thin air. The president let out a deep sigh and glanced down at the magenta book in her hands. It was heavy in weight and in responsibility.

"And I thought *health care* would be my greatest hurdle," she said.

Chapter Twenty-Four

HAPPILY EVER AFTER, AFTER ALL

Once the Otherworld was finally put back in order, the twins and their friends returned to the Land of Stories to do the same. The flames of the albino dragon burned through the fairy-tale world until every brick the Literary Army had misplaced was restored. The kings and queens reclaimed their thrones, and their kingdoms entered a much-needed period of peace and prosperity.

Alex and the Fairy Council waited until all the other kingdoms were finished before turning their attention to the Fairy Kingdom. Once the gardens were replenished, the fairies hosted a service for Rook Robins. His grieving father watched proudly as a large statue was erected in his son's honor beside the statue of the late Fairy Godmother.

"There's nothing in the world I could do or say to ease your pain," Alex told Farmer Robins. "But I wanted to thank you. If you hadn't raised such an extraordinary son, I wouldn't be alive right now. I'll think about him and his sacrifice every day for the rest of my life."

"And I'll spend the rest of my life making peace with it," Farmer Robins said. "Rook was a stubborn boy, but he always followed his heart. And that's more than I can say about most people."

After the Fairy Palace was reassembled, Alex hosted a huge reception on the grand balcony to thank all the people who had helped her and Conner defeat the witches and the Literary Army. Characters from fairy tales, literature, and Conner's writing mingled while they enjoyed drinks and hors d'oeuvres. The pirates of Starboardia told the royal families tales

from the Caribbean Sea, the Merry Men flirted with the Fairy Council despite their blatant disinterest, and the Traveling Tradesman taught the Cyborg Queen how to arrange her galaxy so the planets would always be aligned in her favor.

Once everyone was settled in, Alex tapped the side of her glass to announce a toast. Seeing all the happy faces of her friends and family made her emotional before she had even said a word.

"Four years ago, a twelve-year-old bookworm and a sixth-grade class clown stumbled into this world by accident," Alex told the crowd. "They were both in desperate need of an escape—and boy, did they get one. Year after year, my brother and I have had one adventure of a lifetime after another. However, the more I immersed myself in this world, the more I learned a tough lesson: the *fairy-tale ending* I spent my whole life working toward didn't exist. But recently, someone very close to me redefined what a *happily ever after* actually was. As I look around the balcony, I think I finally understand what they meant.

"*Happily ever after* isn't a finish line, it isn't a paradise, and it isn't a phenomenon that makes all your dreams come true. *Happily ever after* is about finding happiness within yourself and holding on to it through any storm that comes your way. And nothing has helped me grasp that happiness more than having friends and family like you. Knowing I have so many people to love and support me is the most magical feeling in the world. Now I'm certain that *happily ever after* exists because *you* are the happy ending I've dreamed about since I was a little girl. So, to quote that bookworm when she departed this world for the first time, *'Thank you for always being there for me, you're the best friends I've ever had.'* And now, four years later, I still mean every word of it."

The conclusion of Alex's toast was met with passionate applause. She raised her glass to the people who gave her life joy and meaning, and they raised their glasses in return.

Soon the sun began its descent toward the horizon and the time had come for the Bailey twins to say good-bye to their friends from the worlds beyond the kingdoms. Conner laid out all his short stories and all the books of classic literature on the floor and the characters lined up behind the stories they belonged to.

"So long, my fellow explorers," Beau Rogers said. "Don't forget to

write!”

“It’s been an unforgettable voyage,” Auburn Sally said. “I hope we cross paths again.”

“Stay super!” Bolt said. “And don’t be a stranger!”

“Good-bye, humans,” said the Cyborg Queen. “Please don’t bother us again.”

“IT’S WITH THE HEAVIEST OF HEARTS THAT WE LEAVE ALL THESE ATTRACTIVE DAMSELS BEHIND,” Robin Hood said. “FAREWELL, FAIRIES, MAY THE MEMORY OF MY HANDSOME FACE KEEP YOU WARM AT NIGHT.”

After saying good-bye, the Merry Men and all of Conner’s characters stepped through the beams of light shining out from their stories and returned to their home worlds. However, the remaining characters from classic literature had a difficult time leaving.

“Hey, Tin! Are you going back to Oz?” Conner asked him.

“Actually, I’ve decided to stay and live with Trollbella,” the Tin Woodman said. “There’s really nothing for me back in Oz now that I have a heart, and a cross-dimensional relationship sounds awfully tedious. Better to stay put where I feel the happiest.”

“Do you hear that, Butterboy?” Trollbella asked him. “That’s the sound of *commitment*. Take my Butter Tray’s example and the Breemonster won’t slip through your fingers as easily as I did.”

Since Bree was standing right behind him, the Troblin Queen’s comments made Conner blush so hard, he looked like a tomato. He turned around but could barely look Bree in the eye.

“Soooo,” Conner said with a nervous laugh. “That wasn’t the segue I was hoping for, but have you ever considered—”

“Sorry, Conner, I can’t be your girlfriend,” Bree said.

All the color drained from Conner’s face, and he did his best not to look disappointed.

“That’s-totally-fine-no-worries-I’m-super-okay-with-staying-friends,” he said without pausing between words.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” Bree said. “I just know that as soon as I get home I’m going to be grounded for *months*. But once I’m free, I’d love to be your girlfriend.”

All the blood quickly rushed back into Conner’s face. “You *would*?” he

asked. “Cool, well, I guess I’ll see you back at home, then.”

Bree kissed his cheek, then returned to the Otherworld through the *Land of Stories* treasury. Conner was so twitterpated, he practically floated across the balcony. He strolled right by his sister and didn’t even notice that she was having a relationship conundrum of her own.

“I can’t believe you’re making me go back to Camelot,” Arthur said. “Even after pulling the sword from the stone and founding the Knights of the Round Table?”

“You still have work to do, Arthur,” Alex said. “You would never expect me to shortcut my legacy for you, so I won’t allow you to shortcut yours for me. After you find the Holy Grail, your legend will be complete, and I’ll have no reason to keep you there.”

“Fine,” the young king said. “I’ll find the stinking Holy Grail—but only if it makes you happy. How long do you expect it’ll take me?”

“Oh, it’ll take you *years*,” Alex teased. “Maybe even *decades*. You spend your whole life searching for it in the legend.”

Arthur leaned close to Alex and kissed her passionately on the lips.

“I’ll do it in two months,” he said confidently.

Alex blushed. “I’m counting on it,” she said.

Mother Goose rolled her eyes at both sets of love-struck teenagers.

“This place reeks of more adolescent pheromones than a middle school book club,” she said. “Let’s get back to Camelot before the Capulets and the Montagues show up—I’m late for a Pilates class with the Mists of Avalon.”

The twins and their friends gave Mother Goose and Merlin good-bye hugs.

“Bye, M.G.,” Conner said. “Thanks again for saving us in the—”

“Listen, C-Dawg, I need a favor,” Mother Goose whispered while they were hugging. “Remember my vault in Monte Carlo? Well, I haven’t paid the lease in over a year. They’re going to throw my stuff out on the street if someone doesn’t clean it out. In the back corner, behind Plato’s scrolls, you’ll find a brown paper bag. Keep whatever you want, *but flush the bag*. Can you do that for me?”

“Um… sure?” he said. “But what’s in the—”

“You’re a good man,” she said, and patted him on the back.

Conner was equally intrigued and disturbed by the request—but that was how Mother Goose left most people she encountered. She, Merlin, and

Arthur stepped through the beam of light and returned to the world of Camelot.

The only literary characters who hadn't returned to their story were the Lost Boys from Neverland. They stared down at the book *Peter Pan* like it was a deep pool they didn't want to swim in.

"Tobias, what's wrong?" Red asked Tootles. "Don't you want to go home?"

"Miss Red, the Lost Boys and I have something we want to ask you," Tootles said as he nervously twiddled his thumbs. "We love living in Neverland, but now that Slightly is a baby and all, it's a lot harder taking care of ourselves. We know you were just *pretending* to be our mother when you visited, but would you ever consider being our mother *for real*?"

Red was very touched by their request and placed a hand over her heart. She turned to Froggy with large, pleading eyes.

"What do you think, Charlie?" she asked. "I'm never having children the natural way after watching Goldie give birth to Hero—*and Lord only knows what those children would look like*. So why don't we adopt the Lost Boys from Neverland? They're already housebroken, and they make a *delicious* coconut daiquiri."

The thought of being a father brought a huge smile to Froggy's face.

"Actually, I would *love* it if the boys came to live with us," he said.

"Did you hear that, boys?" Red said. "You're now officially part of the Hood-Charming family!"

The Lost Boys cheered, but Peter Pan wanted no part of it.

"Enjoy all your rules, chores, and bedtimes!" he said. "I'm going back to Neverland."

"But, Peter, how could you choose Neverland over being a Hood-Charming?" Curly asked him.

"Two words," Peter said. "*Tiger Lily*. See you later, boys!"

The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up flew through the beam of light and returned to his story with Tinker Bell at his side.

The impromptu adoption reminded Goldilocks of a matter she wanted to discuss with the young queen. "Red, could I have a word?" Goldilocks said. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"The answer is *lather, rinse, repeat*," Red said. "Didn't we have this discussion already?"

Goldilocks sighed. “That’s not what I was going to ask,” she said. “Look, I know we don’t always see eye-to-eye. We’ve had our share of disagreements, we often annoy each other to pieces, and we’ve each tried to kill the other at one point or another—but the truth, whether I want to admit it or not, is that you’re my *best friend*, Red. Would you do me the honor of being Hero’s godmother?”

Red gasped and happy tears filled her eyes. “Yes, of course I will!”

“Terrific,” Goldilocks said. “Because I just asked Porridge and she turned me down.”

Red was so moved by the request, it didn’t even bother her that Goldilocks had asked a horse first. Froggy and Jack shared a laughed as they watched the exchange between their wives.

“So what’s fatherhood like, anyway?” Froggy asked Jack. “Is it as wonderful as it seems?”

“Do you remember sailing through the clouds aboard the *Granny*?” Jack asked.

“How could I forget?” Froggy said, delighted to recall the fond memories. “The wind blowing across our faces, the birds soaring by our side, the sunrise peeking over the frosty mountains—it was a *breathtaking* experience.”

“Right,” Jack said. “Well, do you remember the part when we got shot out of the sky? Do you remember that feeling in the pit of your stomach as the ship plummeted toward the earth at hundreds of miles per hour toward a most certain death? *That’s* what fatherhood is like.”

Froggy gulped. “Lovely.”

While their friends were busy adopting children and having heart-to-hearts about parenthood, Alex and Conner strolled to the far end of the grand balcony for a moment by themselves.

“That was a great toast you gave earlier,” Conner said. “All that talk about *happily ever after* almost convinced me this was the end of our story.”

“The *end* of our story?” Alex asked. “That’s funny, because I was afraid this was only the beginning.”

Conner laughed. “Yeah, you’re probably right,” he said. “I bet right now, as we speak, there’s some big, brooding bad guy somewhere in the cosmos plotting our demise.”

“One could only assume,” Alex said. “I’m guessing the Evil Queen, the Enchantress, the Grande Armée, the Masked Man, the Literary Army, and the witches were just *warm-ups* compared to what’s coming.”

“Oh, they were *kid stuff*,” Conner said. “We can’t even fathom the level of difficulty we’ll be up against next. In fact, we’d have nightmares for weeks if we had a glimpse of what’s waiting for us in the future.”

“And we’ll most likely have to travel to galaxies far and wide to assemble what we need to stop them,” Alex said. “Which will no doubt expose us to much more of Jack’s and Goldilocks’s fearlessness, Froggy’s mindfulness, and Red’s misguidedness.”

“Sounds like fun,” Conner said. “You know, whoever our next enemy is, I already feel awfully sorry for them.”

“Me too,” Alex said. “The poor thing doesn’t stand a chance against us.”

As Alex and Conner watched the sunset over the Fairy Kingdom, they each sighed with the greatest relief of their young lives. The twins weren’t at ease because they expected the period of peace to last very long; on the contrary, they expected many new challenges in the days to come. However, for the first time, they didn’t fear what they couldn’t see.

No matter what obstacle came their way, Alex and Conner knew there was nothing they couldn’t face together. And because of that, the Bailey twins and their friends lived *happily ever after* in the Land of Stories.

The Land of Stories

EPILOGUE

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?

Charlotte "Charlie" Black sat at the top of the stairs eavesdropping on a conversation happening in the living room. In the months leading up to her parents' separation, Charlie had learned that the stairwell had superb acoustics. Unbeknownst to her arguing parents, Charlie had heard every detail about their approaching divorce settlement, their fight for full-time custody, and their plans for handling child support. It was a difficult subject to stomach at times, but Charlie had learned a lot about the state's legal system from her parents' arguments.

Charlie was an eleven-year-old whom people often described as *too smart for her own good*. She had short dark hair, big brown eyes, and beautiful olive skin. She always wore a big denim jacket with a short puffy skirt, bright leggings, and big boots. Charlie chewed on her favorite bottle-cap necklace as she listened to the discussion she wasn't supposed to hear.

However, tonight's entertainment had nothing to do with her parents or their pending divorce. Charlie was hanging on every word of a conversation between her mother and her uncle Matthew, and from the little she'd heard so far, they were talking about her beloved Grandpa Conner.

"I went to Dad's house around eight o'clock tonight to check on him," Matthew said. "When I arrived I found him in his study reading, just like normal, but when I took a closer look I saw he was reading one of his own books. I asked him what he was doing and he said *trying to remember*."

"But trying to remember *what*?" Charlie's mother asked. "Did he forget about something in his books?"

Matthew sighed. “It’s *way* worse than that, Elizabeth,” he said. “Remember the question he got asked on his birthday about Aunt Alex? Well, his answer wasn’t a joke—*Dad genuinely forgot where she was*. But instead of asking one of us, he thought he could find the answer in *one of his stories*.”

“What? But that doesn’t make sense.”

“He convinced himself that the whereabouts of his eighty-year-old twin sister could be found in one of his children’s books. He’s been rereading the Fairytaletopia series, trying to find it.”

“Oh my gosh,” Elizabeth said. “I knew he was having trouble remembering things, but this isn’t memory loss, this is classic dementia.”

“Dad tried to tell me all his books were autobiographical—just like he always does with his readers,” Matthew said. “All his stories about the fairy-tale world and his adventures in classic literature were fun when we were kids, but now they’re really concerning. I think Dad has lost his grip on reality. Last month, he told Ayden and Grayson that magic was *real*—it took Henry and me a couple of days to convince them Grandpa was only teasing them.”

“All right, I hear what you’re saying,” Elizabeth said. “Dad needs help, that much is clear. But what are we going to do to help him?”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have time to deal with this ourselves,” Matthew said. “We’ve got kids, jobs, even *divorces* to worry about. So on my way here, I spoke with the manager of Sunset Crest—it’s an assisted living community up the interstate. They’ve got people who are trained to handle this sort of thing. The manager said they can take him as early as Wednesday.”

Charlie’s mouth dropped open and her bottle-cap necklace fell from her mouth. She couldn’t believe her uncle wanted to put her grandpa in an assisted living place. Her grandpa had always been wacky, that was why she loved him so much, but he was far from being a danger to himself.

“That’s in two days, Matt,” Elizabeth said. “We can’t ship Dad off to some facility with such little notice. That’s just cruel.”

“It would be crueler if we did nothing,” Matthew said. “Look, I love Dad more than anything—that’s why I want to help him before it’s too late. I know a judge downtown who’ll give us power of attorney so we can make this as easy a transition as possible.”

“I suppose if the roles were reversed, Dad would do anything he could to protect us, and this is just returning that favor. But it’s going to break poor Charlie’s heart. She and Dad are so close. I hope she can handle not having him around.”

Before her mother finished her sentence, Charlie already knew *exactly* how she was going to handle it. She quietly stepped out of her bedroom window, climbed down the branches of a tree, and hopped on her bike. She pedaled as fast as she could across town to Grandpa Conner’s house so she could warn him about his children’s terrible plans.

Her grandpa lived in a large brick house that sat on top of a hill and was surrounded by an iron gate. Charlie climbed over the gate and ran up the winding driveway to the front door. She rang the doorbell a dozen times and pounded on the door as if her life depended on it. A few moments later, Mr. Bailey answered the door in an awful fright.

“Charlie?” he asked. “What on earth are you doing out at this hour? Are you hurt?”

“I’m sorry for coming so late, but it’s an emergency!” Charlie announced. “We need to talk right away.”

Charlie stormed into the house and headed for her grandpa’s study. She took a seat in the red armchair by the window, and he took the blue chair by the fireplace—their usual spots.

“Now tell me, what’s so urgent?” Mr. Bailey asked.

“Mom and Uncle Matt are going to put you in a home,” Charlie said. “They think you’ve gone crazy because you believe in magic and think your stories are real. They made plans to take you away on Wednesday and they know a judge who’s going to give them power of attorney.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Bailey asked with a blank expression.

“I heard the whole thing from the stairwell,” Charlie said. “I’m not sure what *power of attorney* is, but if it’s anything like the attorneys handling my parents’ divorce, it can’t be good.”

Charlie was very surprised to see how calm Mr. Bailey was. Her grandpa just sat quietly in his chair and thought.

“Well?” Charlie asked. “What are you going to do? Are you going to run away to the circus? Are you going to flee to Mexico? You’ve got to do something before they take you, Grandpa—you’re the only friend I have.”

His granddaughter’s concern warmed his heart.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’m not going to an assisted living facility on Wednesday,” he reassured her. “As a matter of fact, I have plans to visit my sister this week, and they can’t take a man they can’t find.”

“But Uncle Matt said you didn’t know where your sister was,” Charlie said.

Her grandpa nervously glanced from side to side like he was hiding something.

“Oh, well, I remember *now*,” he explained. “You see, when you get older, things come and go like birds in a tree. When I finally remembered where my sister was, it also dawned on me that I had made plans to see her. So there you have it—a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

Charlie wasn’t buying it. She started to wonder if her uncle and mom were right to be concerned.

“Grandpa, do you *really* believe in magic?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” he said. “Don’t you?”

“Uncle Matt says I’m not supposed to,” Charlie said. “He thinks it means someone’s lost touch with reality.”

Mr. Bailey let out a long, anguished sigh.

“Sweetheart, I love your uncle and your mother with all my heart, but they inherited their personalities from your grandmother’s side of the family. Even when they were children, they were too practical for their own good. But don’t *ever* let anyone tell you magic isn’t real. A kid who doesn’t believe in magic is like a painting without color.”

“I want to believe,” Charlie said. “But it’s hard to take your word for it. I guess I’m waiting for some kind of proof.”

“Ah, but that’s the most mysterious part about magic,” her grandpa said with a twinkle in his eye. “You never know when it’s going to reveal itself to you. That’s why it’s so important to keep an open mind—you don’t want to miss it when the time comes.”

Even if her grandpa was crazy, Charlie still loved playing along.

Mr. Bailey glanced at his watch and jumped up from his chair. “Would you look at the time?” he said. “My sister will be here any minute to collect me and I haven’t even had a chance to pack. You should head home before it gets too late.”

“How long will you be gone, Grandpa?” Charlie asked.

“Long enough to teach your mom and uncle a lesson,” he said. “But

don’t worry, I’ll be back in time for your birthday. I have something very special I’ve been saving for the occasion. Now, off you go.”

Mr. Bailey walked his granddaughter to the front door and hugged her good-bye. But Charlie wasn’t ready to leave just yet. Instead of walking down the hill and getting back on her bike, she snuck into her grandpa’s flowerbed and hid behind the bushes. She wanted to see if her great-aunt Alex was actually coming, or if her grandpa was as delusional as her mom and uncle thought.

Charlie had only seen her great-aunt once or twice in her entire life, so she wasn’t sure she’d even recognize the woman. However, as the minutes dragged on, that proved to be less and less of a problem. No one drove up the driveway to collect her grandpa.

Suddenly, a bright flash shined out from her grandpa’s house. Charlie peeked through the window to see what had caused it. It was hard to see past all her grandpa’s furniture, but Charlie saw that a beautiful older woman had appeared in the living room. She had bright blue eyes and long white hair, and she wore a sparkling robe and headband made of silver flowers.

“Conner? Are you ready yet?” the woman called to him.

Charlie heard thumps as Mr. Bailey came down the stairs from the second floor.

“Sorry, I just remembered to pack!” he said.

“What do you mean, you *just remembered*?” the old woman asked. “We’ve had this trip planned for months. Are you taking the memory potion I left you?”

“I was until I forgot about it,” Mr. Bailey said. “I found it in the fridge this evening and everything came back to me. You wouldn’t believe how worried I was without it—I couldn’t remember where you were and thought something terrible had happened to you when we were kids.”

“You crazy old man,” she said. “When I bring you back home, I’m going to leave a note in every room of your house to remind you to take it. Now come along, everyone is so excited to see you. Red’s throwing an elaborate banquet for you, but fair warning, it’s just an excuse to perform her one-woman rendition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Oh, and word to the wise, Goldilocks broke another hip teaching her grandkids how to do back handsprings. You know how sensitive she gets about injuries, so don’t

call attention to it—*especially* if Jack and Froggy start joking about it."

"My lips are sealed," Mr. Bailey said. "I'm looking forward to seeing everyone, too. I'm not even there yet, but it already feels good to be back. Lead the way, Alex."

Another bright flash of light beamed out of the house. It was a few moments before Charlie could see again. By the time her eyes adjusted, her grandpa and great-aunt had *vanished*. Charlie knew they couldn't have just disappeared into thin air, so she climbed through an open window and searched the house.

"Grandpa? Aunt Alex?" she called. "Where'd you guys go?"

Suddenly, Charlie heard a mysterious vibration coming from above her. She followed the strange noise all the way up the stairs and into the attic. The attic was covered in dust and filled with boxes of her grandpa's old junk. Charlie searched the room for whatever was making the odd sound but didn't find anything out of the ordinary.

Just as she was about to give up and head home, Charlie spotted something out of the corner of her eye. In the middle of the dusty floor was a large emerald-green storybook she had never seen before. Charlie picked up the book, blew the dust off the cover, and read the golden title across the top.

"*The Land of Stories*?" she said. "Hmmm, that sounds familiar."

Although she was convinced her eyes were playing tricks on her, Charlie watched in amazement as the storybook's pages started to glow….

The End

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